

**A “SERIES OF OPERATIONS”: EDGAR DEGAS, THE STEEPLECHASE,  
AND THE THEMATICS OF LOSS**

by

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## Abstract

This dissertation is the first sustained analysis of Edgar Degas's two monumental paintings of the steeplechase theme: *The Steeplechase*, which the artist began around 1866 and continued to revise over the course of four decades, and *The Fallen Jockey* which he painted around 1896-8. With regard to *The Steeplechase* my dissertation argues against the conventional art historical view that the painting unproblematically represents Degas's first major effort to picture modern life. Until now, scholars have viewed the painting within the framework of the art of his impressionist contemporaries, namely those painters who focused on the open air, the *vie moderne* of Parisian life, the pleasures of the landscape and its many entertainments. Instead, my dissertation redirects attention to the powerful influence of the generation of French painters that preceded Degas, specifically those who themselves took up the theme of horse painting. Through a close textual analysis of Salon criticism, I argue that for Degas, as for his predecessors, the equestrian subject served as a useful pictorial construct by which to grapple with questions to do with the transformation and, ultimately, the loss of history painting—or *la grande peinture*—during the first half of the nineteenth century. Probing the nature of Degas's modifications of *The Steeplechase*, including its final iteration in the form of *The Fallen Jockey*, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate the depth of Degas's commitment to ambitious painting—even at the cost of self-exposure of the most intimate kind. Additionally, in tracing the

shifting pictorial norms over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century within the context of Degas's evolving treatment of the steeplechase theme this dissertation will offer an alternative account of the aging artist: rather than a solitary recluse we discover an artist deeply responsive to contemporary currents in art. This appreciation serves as the foundation for my account of Degas's masterful, yet understudied *Fallen Jockey*: as essentially a final statement on the fate of ambitious painting in the *fin-de-siècle*.

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## Introduction

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, French artists, critics and intellectuals were presented with a field of styles and theories of art, sometimes incompatible or opposing, from Courbet's palpable realism to the verdant landscapes of the Impressionists, to the intensely felt coloristic discordances of the Symbolists. While typically we associate Edgar Degas (1834-1917) with the Impressionist movement he, in fact, tried his hand at all of the above modes. Such realist and symbolist critics as Edmond Duranty and Joris-Karl Huysmans recognized as much and each was keen to claim Degas as one of his own. The way in which these critics appropriated his art to fit the terms of their own interests has been well established in art historical scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps because of the uniqueness of Degas's pictorial achievements do we less often think of Degas as having himself appropriated the various styles and theories of his day in an effort to negotiate his own set of art historical interests.<sup>2</sup> Drawing

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Carol Armstrong's important study, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991). Armstrong analyzes, in particular, the varied critical vocabularies used to describe Degas's art by realist and symbolist critics. "Duranty attempts to fit unnamed works by Degas to a Third Republic version of the older Realist program; while Huysmans labors to fit Degas's series of nudes to a negation, inversion, and introversion of that program" (17).

<sup>2</sup> For a recent, compelling argument against the entrenched view of Degas's immunity to contemporary art historical influences see Bridget Alsdorf's *Fellow Men: Fantin-Latour and the Problem of the Group in Nineteenth-Century French Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), in particular pages 217-28. Alsdorf writes: "Critics of his time and scholars of our own have understood him as an arch-individualist, the obstinate 'odd man out,' not only financially and emotionally self-sufficient, but artistically autonomous, too" (217). But "throughout his career, he repeatedly returned to problems of resemblance, kinship, friendship, and professional alliance, constructing an image of the individual as inherently dependant on



primarily on the detailed analysis of two of Degas's paintings—*The Steeplechase* (**fig. 1**), which Degas painted in 1866 and continued to rework over the course of four decades, and *The Fallen Jockey* (**fig. 2**), which he painted in the mid-to-late 1890s—my dissertation addresses the way in which these works developed in response to and within a complex environment. My study argues that these particular paintings served as a vital testing ground in which Degas explored the ways in which the various styles and theories of the latter half of the nineteenth century could address some of the central, lingering questions of early nineteenth-century art, primarily those to do with the viability of ambitious painting after the death, pronounced at mid-century, of *grande peinture*. My study marks a departure from the questions that have occupied Degas scholars in recent years—the politics of race, visibility and gender, for instance<sup>3</sup>—in order to return to a

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others for distinction” (217). It is in his group portraits that Degas concedes “the fundamentally social nature of the modern self, a self formed in and through an intimate network of other selves” (227).

<sup>3</sup> Some of the salient scholarship on these themes: Charles Bernheimer, “Degas’s Brothels: Voyeurism and Ideology,” *Representations* 20 (Autumn 1987): 158-86; Norma Broude, “Degas’s ‘Misogyny,’” in Broude and Mary Garrard, eds. *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 247-70; Broude, “Edgar Degas and French Feminism, ca. 1880: ‘The Young Spartans,’ the Brothel Monotypes, and the Bathers Revisited,” in Broude and Mary Garrard, eds. *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 269-94; Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method, and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock, eds. *Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision* (London: Pandora Press, 1992); Werner Hofmann, *Degas: A Dialogue of Difference* (London; New York: Thames & Hudson, 2007); Eunice Lipton, *Looking into Degas: Uneasy Images of Women and Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). While none of these studies focus on Degas’s representations of horses *per se*, but rather his bathers, dancers or laundresses, considering that the horse afforded Degas an opportunity to study the living body, his interest in equine imagery likely paralleled something of his interest in the actions of these women. This is to say that Degas’s depictions of the body—which included the (essentially gender-neutral) subject of the horse—may arguably preclude those concerns to do with the beholder’s gaze and the politics of vision.

decidedly traditional set of concerns that we have come to believe Degas abandoned when he gave up history painting and joined the ranks of the Impressionists.

Given that Degas worked on *The Steeplechase* over the course of four decades, concluding his revisions with an entirely new version of the painting in the form of *The Fallen Jockey*, the present study will weigh heavily on Degas's obsessive revisionism.<sup>4</sup> The title of this dissertation—"a series of operations"—is drawn from the poet and essayist Paul Valéry's important work of art criticism, *Degas danse dessin* (1938), in which Valéry attributes these words to the artist himself: "He would say that a picture is the result of a *series of operations*."<sup>5</sup> In his study, Valéry emphasizes the way in which Degas's art served as a site within which the artist self-reflexively questioned the terms of his own art. Editing his work was essential to this process. While most scholarship tends to attribute Degas's extensive reworking to the artist's pursuit of formal perfection, I will propose an account of the conceptual reasons that underpin them in keeping with

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most frequently cited anecdotes of the artist's compulsion to revise is told by Ernest Rouart, grandson of the painter, Henri Rouart. "Revenant constamment chez mon père un délicieux pastel que celui qui avait acquis et qu'il aimait beaucoup, Degas fut pris de son habituel et impérieux besoin de retoucher le tableau. Il y revenait sans cesse et, de guerre lasse, mon père finit par lui laisser emporter l'objet. On ne le revit jamais. Mon père demandait souvent des nouvelles de son cher pastel; Degas répondait d'une façon dilatoire, mais il dut finir par avouer son crime; il avait complètement démoli l'oeuvre à lui confiée pour une simple retouche." Quoted in Paul Valéry, *Degas danse dessin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 161-2.

<sup>5</sup> "Il disait qu'un tableau est le résultat d'une *série d'opérations*." Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 9. Elsewhere Valéry writes: "Une oeuvre était pour Degas le résultat d'une quantité indéfinie d'études, et puis, d'une *série d'opérations*. Je crois bien qu'il pensait qu'une oeuvre ne peut jamais être dite achevée, et qu'il ne concevait pas qu'un artiste pût revoir un de ses tableaux après quelque temps sans ressentir le besoin de le reprendre et d'y remettre la main" (89).

Valéry's characterization of the artist's pictorial intelligence.<sup>6</sup> That Degas's interest in these paintings of the steeplechase spanned his working career points to their centrality in his investigations. One fact alone—that Degas's revisions of *The Steeplechase* led to the creation of an altogether new version of the painting—strongly suggests that more was at stake than formal perfection through technical mastery.

Given Degas's persistent interest in the steeplechase paintings, it might seem surprising that *The Fallen Jockey* has received meager scholarly attention. At the recent exhibition in 2013 at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel, the first exhibition devoted exclusively to Degas's late work, the curators aimed to rectify this situation granting *The Fallen Jockey* a culminating position in a room of its own in the final gallery. Yet, the exhibition did not offer any real account of the painting. While it was strikingly different than the other one-hundred-and-fifty works on show in its choice of subject, scale and materiality—most works were small photographs and pastel drawings of dancers and bathers—the curators offered no explanation for that difference.<sup>7</sup> In large part, I suspect that this kind of

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<sup>6</sup> In his article on the subject, Theodore Reff acknowledges our limited understanding of the reasons for Degas's revisions of his works, in particular those early works "disfigured by later revisions...like *Alexander and the Bucephalus* whose carefully rendered details were half obliterated by heavy paint applied with a palette knife." He admits that this kind of "destructive repainting many years later is...difficult to understand." Reff, "The Technical Aspects of Degas's Art," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 4 (1971): 164.

<sup>7</sup> When *The Fallen Jockey* hung at the major, retrospective exhibition of Degas's art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1989, the curators found the character of the painting to be consistent with the manner of his "late expressive style." Jean Sutherland Boggs, *Degas: [an Exhibition Held At The] Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris 9 février-16 mai 1988, Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, Ottawa 16 juin-28 août 1988: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 27 septembre 1988-9 janvier 1989* (Paris: Ministère de la culture et de la

critical silence is due to the fact that *The Steeplechase*, the work upon which *The Fallen Jockey* is drawn, is itself one that has yet to be fully understood. One primary objective of this dissertation is to offer an account of the later painting by first establishing the grounds upon which we might interpret the first.

Organized chronologically in four chapters, the first chapter of this dissertation begins by describing the subject of and circumstances (that we know of) in which Degas painted *The Steeplechase* and *The Fallen Jockey*, as well as a small watercolor of the former. I will go on to survey the secondary literature on *The Steeplechase* in an effort to make a case for the insufficiency of the interpretations that scholars have offered thus far. My dissertation argues against the conventional art historical view that the painting unproblematically represents Degas's first major effort to picture modern life. Until now, scholars have viewed the painting within the framework of the art of his contemporaries, namely those impressionist painters who focused on the open air, the *vie moderne* of Parisian life, the pleasures of the landscape and its many entertainments. Instead, my dissertation redirects attention to the powerful influence of the generation of French painters that preceded Degas, specifically those who themselves took up the theme of horse painting, and for whom a certain ideal of *grande peinture* was a motivating force in their enterprise.

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communication, 1988), 561. In contrast, the exhibition in Basel seemed to stress the painting's difference, its apartness from Degas's late works. One of the aims of this dissertation is to explain how this painting is at once manifestly *like* and *unlike* Degas's other works of the 1890s: what I believe to be a conflict internal to the painting itself in its search for a way to unite an avant-garde idiom with an older genre of art.

Chapter One will go on to contextualize *The Steeplechase* within its historical moment by describing the crisis of the mid-nineteenth century when a growing number of critics and artists felt that traditional history painting, *la grande peinture*—the pinnacle of the hierarchy of genres since the foundation of the Académie des beaux-arts in the seventeenth century—had lost its ability to make a powerful impression on the contemporary beholder. “Unhappy history painting, pushed to its limits, seems close to disappearing forever,” the critic Maxime Du Camp lamented in response to the Universal Exposition of 1855.<sup>8</sup> Advanced critics and artists of the early nineteenth century had recognized the necessity of a new kind of ambitious painting to set the terms of pictorial achievement and, in response, invented an altogether novel kind of painting, *genre historique*, in their effort to forge a type of painting that could represent themes and ideas of contemporary relevance. I will describe this genre of painting with particular attention to the role that the increasingly lifelike image of the horse played within this context. The chapter follows with a new interpretation of Degas’s *Steeplechase* as constituting the young artist’s engagement with the critical polemic that took shape in response to the crisis and reform of historical representation. This reading affords a way to account for the painting’s

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<sup>8</sup> “L’art de reproduire sur la toile un fait historique n’existe réellement plus. Les peintres ne savent plus même aujourd’hui à quoi se décider et vers quelles interprétations se tourner. Doivent-ils toujours graviter autour des récits de l’antiquité dont on ne se soucie guère? Doivent-ils se consacrer à l’illustration de faits religieux auxquels on ne croit plus? Doivent-ils aborder franchement les actions contemporaines, quitter à se tromper et à prendre souvent un engouement passager pour de la célébrité? Nul d’entre eux n’a l’air de le savoir, et la malheureuse peinture historique, réduite à l’extrémité dernière, semble près de disparaître à jamais.” Du Camp, *Les Beaux-arts à l’exposition universelle de 1855* (Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1855), 14.

idiosyncrasies on whose account it is has often been dismissed as a failed painting or, alternatively, simply overlooked as it was, for instance, at the Salon of 1866 where it first hung. The chapter concludes by situating *The Steeplechase* in relation more broadly to Degas's own historical paintings of the 1860s and in relation to Manet's *Dead Toreador* (1864) and Gérôme's *Death of Caesar*, a less often recognized source of influence on the young Degas. The concerns of both of these contemporaneous paintings can also be mapped onto explicit historical and discursive considerations arising out of the Salon, specifically with regards to *grande peinture* and its convention of depicting tragedy. The problem of depicting a death scene in such a way that could move the contemporary spectator—which I argue to be the salient issue at the heart of all three paintings—will be revisited in the final chapter.

With the aid of conservators' reports, Chapter Two offers the first sustained account of Degas's modifications of *The Steeplechase* in the decades following its creation. I describe in detail the nature of the artist's reworking of the painting within the context of the changed art historical circumstances of the 1880s, primarily in light of Eadweard Muybridge's publication of his photographic stills of the horse in motion. I argue that the character of Degas's reworking of *The Steeplechase*, siding towards antinaturalism, adumbrates what I believe to be *The Fallen Jockey*'s effort to go against the grain of the naturalist reform of ambitious painting that began a century prior with the advent of *genre historique*. The chapter concludes by focusing specifically on Degas's antinaturalist reinvention of

the horse's movement in this later painting: what I understand to be an effort to rewrite the narrative of equestrian painting as it was conceived by French critics at mid-century. The iconic image of the "flying gallop"—as a rejoinder both to Muybridge and Meissonier's equestrian imagery—forwards the terms of Degas's historicism, that is, his yearning to attach himself to an artistic tradition of past greatness in order to, paradoxically, make room for a new kind of ambitious painting suited to the conditions of the present. *The Fallen Jockey* is then aligned with a series of phantasmagoric landscape monotypes that Degas undertook in 1890 that also seem part of the artist's repudiation of naturalism—in this instance represented by the figure of Monet—in an effort to rethink the possibility of ambitious painting.

Chapter Three begins with a discussion of the classical revival in the *fin-de-siècle* and the explicit retheorization of *grande peinture* in relation to the anti-naturalist paradigm of decorative art in the 1890s. The chapter situates Degas's *Fallen Jockey* within this context as itself constituting a reprisal and rethinking of the concerns of the 1860s, specifically with regard to the rise of genre painting. I will argue that *The Fallen Jockey* allies itself with the Symbolist pursuit of decoration as a strategic means to forge an alliance with the lost art of history painting. The tragic aspect of the painting will then be attributed to Degas's ultimate acknowledgement of the insuperable distance between past and present; yet, in explicitly reestablishing his connection with the art of Manet, *The Fallen Jockey* seems to signal an acceptance of its own modernist lineage.

My fourth chapter continues from the third as I explore the underestimated importance for Degas of the avant-garde, marionette stage of the 1860s and 1890s in France. Utilizing the anti-naturalist aesthetic of the marionette stage, we find another way in which *The Fallen Jockey* furthers the dialogue with Manet that had begun four decades earlier with regards to forging a new kind of painting—in this instance, drawing out the expressive potential of the affinity between painting and a form of theater, one that Manet's *Dead Toreador* seemed to adumbrate. I will describe the way in which Degas (like avant-garde playwrights of the 1860s and 1890s) utilizes the artifice of the marionette stage in an effort to resolve one of the central problems of the post-romantic era—that is, the problematic of tragic expression following the general acknowledgement of the failure of conventional pictorial (and theatrical) practices to move the beholder.

The second part of this chapter shifts the discussion back to the realm of historical representation. In a period of increasing demand for the revival of an ambitious kind of public art, I argue that, in spite of Degas's assumed retreat from contemporary life and art, we find him deeply engaged with the contemporary question of how a history painting might function in the modern era. Drawing on recent scholarship, primarily Stephen Bann's seminal analyses of the evolution of historical image-making in the early nineteenth century, I argue that Degas's *Fallen Jockey* ought to be understood as both part of—and signaling the end of—the trajectory of historical representation in which genre played a key role. An elegy of sorts, *The Fallen Jockey* pictures the end result of the merging of genre



and history, the “inward turn,” as I call it, of historical representation brought to its ultimate conclusion: history painting without history.

I conclude with an intimate portrayal of Degas that mediates between biography and pictorial affect, foregrounding privacy and interiority as problems central both to modernism and to Degas’s own personhood. I examine Degas’s response to the Dreyfus Affair of 1894 in relation to *The Fallen Jockey*’s final negation of a century of public-oriented art production. A kind of statement about the impossibility of making one, *The Fallen Jockey* pictures the conditions of the polarized present, realizing at last *The Steeplechase*’s ambition of finding a historical art of the present, a composition that encodes his era in the painted surface.

A word about my methodology before I begin. Rather than assuming one “methodology” from the outset, my first commitment will be to the paintings themselves and to what can be seen within the complex historical circumstances of their making. To this end, I rely heavily on the task of close looking and, relatedly, to the evidence conservational analysis provides. In addition, I give substantial weight to the art criticism of Degas’s era, including the opinions and even casual remarks of Degas’s closest friends; and, finally, to the substance and tone of the most intimate of Degas’s diary entries from youth to old age. Finally, while isolating so few works from Degas’s *oeuvre* might seem like a tendentious project, given the evolving nature of the paintings under discussion—what I take to be an expression of Degas’s desire to understand and come to grips with an

entire history of advanced French painting as it evolved over the course of the nineteenth century (while negotiating and renegotiating his own place within it)—it might be the only way to begin to do these works justice.

## Chapter One

### *The Steeplechase and the challenge of the 1860s*

#### 1.1 Introduction: *The Steeplechase, The Fallen Jockey, and a small watercolor*

Before the first fall of winter snow in the autumn of 1861, Edgar Degas visited the Château Ménil-Hubert near Ornes in Normandy with his old school friend, Henri Valpinçon. At the age of twenty-seven, Degas observed first-hand the equestrian world of the famous stud of Haras-du-Pin in the neighborhood. There, he stood as a young spectator to the steeplechase, a sport dating back to the early 1800s and made popular in France in the 1860s with the establishment of the *Société Général des Steeplechases*, led by a distant relative of Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>9</sup> Degas recorded the event in his journal: riders of the aristocracy and military rode across green-tinted ponds and umber earth, through grasslands enclosed by hedges, jumping streams and low stonewalls, traversing wet paths and other such obstacles along the journey through the terrain of the countryside.<sup>10</sup> The steeplechase took its name from those early races where orientation of the course was by reference to the tall stone of a distant church steeple.

About two decades later, Mary Cassatt worked hard to acquire the painting born of Degas's first experience of the sport, *Scene from the Steeplechase: The*

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<sup>9</sup> Prince Joachim Murat

<sup>10</sup> "Des Herbages petits et grands, tous clos de haies, des sentiers humides, des mares du vert et de la terre d'ombre." Theodore Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas: A Catalogue of the Thirty-Eight Notebooks in the Bibliothèque Nationale and Other Collections* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 161.

*Fallen Jockey*, which the artist painted in 1866. She hoped to give it as a gift to her brother, Alexander Cassatt, an avid fan of the race. At about seventy-one by sixty inches, the picture was considered by Cassatt's mother too big for her son's home, but anyway doubted that Degas would sell it. In 1880, Mme. Cassatt explained the situation to her son:

I don't know whether Mary has written to you or not on the subject of pictures. I didn't encourage her much as to buying the large one being afraid that it would be too big for anything but a gallery or a room with a great many pictures in it – but as it is unfinished or rather as a part of it has been washed out and Degas imagines he cannot retouch it without painting the whole over again and can't make up his mind to do that, I doubt if he ever sells it.<sup>11</sup>

Cassatt herself recalled the artist's revisions many years later, when the painting finally did sell, at the Degas atelier sale after the artist's death.

Degas you know wanted to retouch it and drew black lines over the horses' head and wanted to change the movement...I begged him so to give it as it was, it was very finished, but he was determined to change it.<sup>12</sup>

Before Degas made the changes that the Cassatts describe, the artist first painted a sketch of *The Steeplechase*, recording what it looked like hanging in his

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<sup>11</sup> “Je ne sais pas si Mary t’a écrit au sujet des tableaux. Je ne l’ai pas encouragée à acheter le grand tableau, qui risque d’être trop grand et de ne pouvoir être accroché que dans un musée ou dans une salle contenant de nombreux tableaux, mais comme il est inachevé, ou plutôt comme une partie en a été supprimée et que Degas ne croit pas pouvoir le retoucher sans tout reprendre, ce qu’il ne peut se décider à faire, je doute qu’il le vende jamais.” Boggs, *Degas*, 561.

<sup>12</sup> “Degas, qui voulait le retoucher, dessina des lignes noires sur la tête des chevaux. Il voulait changer le mouvement...Je l’ai supplié de le lui remettre tel qu’il était, puisqu’il est tout à fait achevé, mais il était déterminé à le reprendre.” Ibid.

studio at 21 rue Pigalle.<sup>13</sup> Now in the Israel Museum, this small sketch, painted in broad, quick strokes of watery paint, offers a sense of what the original painting looked like when it hung in the “room with a great many pictures in it,” at the Salon of 1866: along the incline of a well-trod, umber-green hill, a riderless horse charges downwards, at full speed; two mounted jockeys ride alongside it; one fallen horse and one fallen jockey lie on the ground (**fig. 3**). Albeit merely a documentary sketch of the original painting, one still senses, here, an ongoing questioning, a searching for a rightness to the configuration of elements, of horses, jockeys and earth. Above the caps of the two mounted riders, for instance, faint, black lines hover like halos, still searching for the right position of these riders’ heads.<sup>14</sup> Something about this equestrian subject never gave Degas respite. For at some point between 1896 and 1898, about thirty years after first painting *The Steeplechase*, Degas returned to the subject once more. Beneath the steep roof of his final studio, maybe near the tall stone window, on the fourth floor of 37 rue

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<sup>13</sup> Some scholars consider this sketch a preliminary drawing for *The Steeplechase* and date it to 1866. See, for instance, Paul-Henry Boerlin, “Zum Thema des gestürzten Reiters bei Edgar Degas,” in *Jahresbericht des Oeffentlichen Kunstsammlung Basel* (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 1963) and Ronald Pickvance, *Degas’ Racing World* (New York: Wildenstein, 1968). Gary Tinterow, on the other hand, proposes an 1870s date in the catalogue entry to the 1988-9 retrospective exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: “No has yet put forward a plausible explanation for the small picture Degas painted, perhaps in the 1870s, that shows *The Steeplechase* hanging in the studio with *one* riderless horse” (Boggs, *Degas*, 561). Jean Sutherland Boggs, however, supports an 1880s date for the following reasons: “It is not impossible...that it was painted when Mr. Cassatt decided he wanted to buy the Salon painting. At that time Degas was painting spectators in galleries on square canvases, such as *The Visit to the Museum*, dated about 1885.” Boggs, et al., *Degas at the Races* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1998), 122. There are other features of this sketch to be discussed in Chapter Two, such as the fact of the *one* riderless horse, that suggest an 1880s date—around the time of the publication of Muybridge’s photographic studies.

<sup>14</sup> If we look more closely still we can make out, off to the right, another unresolved equestrian subject hanging in Degas’s studio with similar black, halo-like lines that trace the curve of its rider’s cap.

Victor Massé, one would have seen a new, starker version of the original painting, with only one riderless horse and one fallen rider. Degas was now in his sixties.

“A picture,” Degas is quoted as saying, is “the result of a *series of operations*.”<sup>15</sup> Of all his works this might be most true of *The Steeplechase* with its multiple versions born of numerous campaigns of revision. Unable to leave it alone, unwilling to let it out of his studio, *The Steeplechase* became a site of an intense, long-running questioning of his own practice—even a site, I think, where he worked out his own conflicted sense of the kind of posterity he imagined for himself.

If you were single, 50 years of age (for the last month) you would know similar moments when a door shuts inside one and not only on one’s friends....I thought there would always be enough time. Whatever I was doing, whatever I was prevented from doing, in the midst of all my enemies and in spite of my infirmity of sight, I never despaired of getting down to it some day.<sup>16</sup>

This was Degas writing in 1884, at around the time that he reflected back on the work of his youth from the distance of middle age, when he stood a few feet back from *The Steeplechase* and recorded its original state. If we, too, look back, and more closely now at this sketch, an almost imperceptible figure whose back is

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<sup>15</sup> “Il disait qu’un tableau est le résultat d’une *série d’operations*.” Valéry, *Degas*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> “Si vous étiez célibataire et âgé de 50 ans (depuis un mois) vous auriez de ces moments-là, où on se ferme comme une porte, et non pas seulement sur ses amis....Je pensais avoir toujours le temps; ce que je ne faisais, ce qu’on m’empêchait de faire, au milieu de tous mes ennuis et malgré mon infirmité de vue, je ne désespérais jamais de m’y mettre un beau matin.” Letter to Henry Lerolle on August 21, 1884. Degas, *Lettres de Degas*, ed. Marcel Guérin (Paris: B. Grasset, 1931), 64-5. Translated in Degas, *Degas Letters*, ed. Marcel Guérin (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1947), 81.

turned toward us emerges in the foreground in the form of a rectangular shape of ethereal bluish-grey. This spectral presence foreshadows Degas's late experiments in photography: so often, on close viewing, they, too, intimate the artist's presence in an aesthetics of indirection, mediated through the space of the studio. In one such photograph, for instance, Degas would pose Stéphane Mallarmé and Renoir in front of a mirror in his living room, which also served as his studio (**fig. 4**). The ethereal black shape of the camera's reflection in the mirror captures Degas's off-stage presence, like the revelation of the strings of a master puppeteer.<sup>17</sup> Degas painted *The Fallen Jockey* during the same years when he was experimenting with these ghostly effects of photographic reflection. They share the same darkened mood of reflection. "About the sadness which is the lot of those involved with art," Degas wrote in his diary: "It increases with age and progress and youth doesn't exist any more to console you with a few illusions and hopes."<sup>18</sup> Degas was only twenty-four when he wrote this, but he was already writing retrospectively, from the imagined perspective of the aged artist looking back at his youth. The equestrian theme seemed to serve Degas's predilection for

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<sup>17</sup> "Though these, instead of the features of the artist, are the photograph's ingredients, it is nevertheless a kind of self-portrait. For the reflected camera within it is the artist; that black shape in the mirror *is* Degas. This is a kind of self-portrait presented and named as a portrait of others." Carol Armstrong, "Reflections on the Mirror: Painting, Photography, and the Self-Portraits of Edgar Degas," *Representations* 22 (Spring 1988): 115.

<sup>18</sup> Letter to Gustave Moreau from Florence on September 21, 1858. "Je me rappelle la conversation que nous avons eu à Florence sur les tristesses qui sont la part de celui qui s'occupe d'art... Elles augmentent avec l'âge et les progrès et la jeunesse n'est plus pour vous consoler par un peu plus d'illusions et d'espérances..." Degas continues: "Je vous parle de tristesse." Theodore Reff, "More Unpublished Letters of Degas," *The Art Bulletin* 51.3 (September 1969): 282. Translated in Richard Kendall, *Degas by Himself: Drawings, Prints, Paintings, Writings* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1987), 31.

traversing and collapsing time in this way. Revisiting the theme of the steeplechase as an aged artist, he now reflected back on the work of his youth and his revisions of it in middle age.

## 1.2 Critical interpretations of *The Steeplechase*

Art historians have always sensed the importance of Degas's *Steeplechase*, which hangs in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Its size alone declares its ambition. "Pictures like *The Steeplechase*....marked the launch of Degas's career as a painter of modern-life subjects," Richard Kendall writes, comparing "his first topical submission to the Salon" to "Monet's scenes of the picnic" and "rural recreation and the suburban spectacle."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, scholarship tends to see the significance of the painting in terms of it marking the naturalist turn to genre painting of contemporary life. "The dramatic incident depicted by Degas is clearly modern," Michael Pantazzi writes.<sup>20</sup> "A slice of modern life" is how Linda Nochlin describes it.<sup>21</sup> "A contemporary mishap," is Roy McMullen's description.<sup>22</sup> Virginia Spate elaborates along these same lines:

When he returned from France in 1859, he began painting formal portraits and history paintings as if planning a conventional career. Nevertheless, in

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<sup>19</sup> Kendall, *Degas Landscapes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 82, 70, 60.

<sup>20</sup> Jane Kinsman and Michael Pantazzi, *Degas: The Uncontested Master* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2008), 60.

<sup>21</sup> Nochlin, *Realism* (Harmondsworth, New York: Penguin, 1979), 72.

<sup>22</sup> McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times and Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 132.



the early 1860s...and, by the second half of the decade, he seems to have decided to become a Realist painter of contemporary life.<sup>23</sup>

With Degas's equine imagery in mind, Henri Loyrette traced the course of Degas's career similarly: "Around 1865...he seemed to have given up history painting for good."<sup>24</sup> Eunice Lipton's, albeit more idiosyncratic reading of the painting, runs parallel with these views, in terms of its having to do with Degas's turn away from representing the past to that of the present, in this instance, the contemporary jockeying for power:

Horse racing was a tense and festive event in late nineteenth-century Paris...For the rich, whatever their interest in horses, going to the track was also about titillation and display, social and sexual strutting, the nervous scanning and scrutiny of the crowd, and, finally, the simple confirmation of power.<sup>25</sup>

One wonders, however, if Lipton's opinion, like those other ones cited, takes full measure of the complex character of genre painting at this moment (the critical discourse of the period helps us appreciate it) and the way in which Degas's painting might manifest this complexity.

Kendall, a respected Degas scholar, also thinks that *The Steeplechase*, with "its jockey lying unconscious on the turf," is ultimately to do with "the

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<sup>23</sup> Spate, *Degas: Life and Works* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2000), 9.

<sup>24</sup> "Aux alentours de 1865...il semble renoncer définitivement à la peinture d'histoire." Loyrette, *Degas: "Je voudrais être illustre et inconnu"* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 38.

<sup>25</sup> Lipton, *Looking Into Degas*, 17.

abrasiveness of modern experience.”<sup>26</sup> Yet, he is sensitive to the fact that in Degas’s art, as he observes in the artist’s notebooks, “historic and contemporary images of the horse frequently rub shoulders.”<sup>27</sup> Kendall’s observation suggests a less than straightforward commitment, then, to the equestrian world of contemporary leisure. Kendall continues:

More revealingly, certain motifs will ‘escape’ from one context to another, as if the artist took their continuity for granted: a frieze-like classical composition might reappear as a family outing at the races, while a truncated thoroughbred will resurface as a medieval battle horse.<sup>28</sup>

*The Steeplechase* itself might be seen as a complex hybridization of equestrian images, combining both the present-day image of the steeplechase with earlier, painted images of the race. Its combined elements of a runaway horse, a fallen horse, and a dismounted rider, for instance, recalls Horace Vernet’s *The Start of the Race of the Riderless Horses* of 1820 which Degas, in fact, copied in 1850. (Vernet himself was inspired by Théodore Géricault’s painting of a race of wild horses at the Roman carnival of 1817.) Allusions of this kind, which point to the well-established pictorial tradition of contemporary horse racing, undermine the specificity of *The Steeplechase*’s achievement, as having been among the first to depict this modern life subject. Allusions of this kind also impel a closer look at Degas’s interest in the equestrian art of the immediate past, in addition to his

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<sup>26</sup> Kendall, *Degas Landscapes*, 70.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

known interest in its ancient and medieval incarnations.

There are those scholars who think that *The Steeplechase* has more to do with tradition than modernity—or at least some curious blending of the two. (“It always seems that there must be, in the most beautiful monuments, this mixture of tastes,” Degas wrote in a journal entry in his early twenties, while travelling through Italy, trying to pinpoint exactly what it was about the art he loved best.<sup>29</sup>) Jean Sutherland Boggs, a long-time scholar of Degas and the main curator of The National Gallery of Art’s *Degas at the Races* (1998), the first major exhibition devoted to the equestrian works,<sup>30</sup> writes of *The Steeplechase*:

Undoubtedly the large painting, as it was shown at the Salon of 1866, was of a contemporary subject, but it also must have seemed, in this austere version limited to the horse and fallen jockey, something of an allegory...Degas may have still been within the tradition of history painting.<sup>31</sup>

Robert Herbert circles on a similar point: “Degas’s picture...is an unusually large one for him, and must mean that he wished to rival history painting by elevating a contemporary subject to such a scale.”<sup>32</sup> Boggs and Herbert’s reference to “tradition” and “history painting” rings true. The question remains, however, whether such terms like “tradition” and “history painting” can be made more

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<sup>29</sup> “Toujours il faut qu’il y ait dans les plus beaux monuments ce mélange de tous les goûts.” Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 69. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> A smaller exhibition, “Degas’ Racing World,” was assembled by Daniel Wildenstein in New York in 1968.

<sup>31</sup> Boggs, *Degas At the Races*, 58.

<sup>32</sup> Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 160.

precise, thus helping us to identify the uniqueness of Degas's achievement.

Of course, Degas's love for the art of the past is not easy to rein in, nor do I want to: his art demands that we read into his brush his deep feeling for the grave lines of Herodotus, Ovid, Plutarch and Dante, and all the works of his classical education at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. His studied notebooks tell us of his ecumenical veneration of the pictorial achievements of the past, of Egyptian murals, Assyrian reliefs, "the beauty of Pompeian paintings," the "sublime movement" of Giotto and "Raphael's arabesques."<sup>33</sup> "Van Dyck is a great artist, Giorgione also, Botticelli also, Mantegna also, Rembrandt also, Carpaccio also," Degas scrawled, breathlessly, during his first travels through Italy in his early twenties, overcome by the plentitude of the past masters.<sup>34</sup> Yet, at the age of thirty-two, when Degas set down to paint *The Steeplechase*, I suspect that he had a specific canon of art in mind: not "tradition" or "history painting" *per se*, but rather its recent reinventions by those French painters who sought to secure the very relevance of such terms. They did so by way of a truly novel kind of genre painting, constituting a chimerical hybrid of past and present, in which the horse often played a central role in the pairing.

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<sup>33</sup> "En entrant à gauche dans l'Egl[ise] sup[érieure] [the Upper Church at Assisi]—au dessus de la corniche—2 figures de saintes dames belles comme des peintures de Pompei"; "Giotto—mouvement sublime du St François chassant les démons"; "Chapel—giannicola très belle couleur—Sybilles Lybica et Erythrea ont aussi plus de largeur qu'à l'ordinaire—aussi les arabesques de Raphael." Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 70-1. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 28, 24.

<sup>34</sup> "Van Dyck est un fameux artiste, Giorgion aussi, Botticelli aussi, Mantegna aussi, Rembrandt aussi, Carpaccio aussi." Reff, "More Unpublished Letters of Degas," 283. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 33.

### **1.3 “Entre deux mondes”: The loss of history painting and the ascendancy of genre**

1855 was a defining year, not only for Degas who was admitted to the École des Beaux-Arts, but also, more broadly, for the French art world: in the spring of that year the Universal Exhibition was staged in the Champs-Élysées, a major event in France then newly under the reign of Emperor Napoleon III. At the fine arts section of the exhibition the organizers showed the best of contemporary French art. Delacroix and Ingres were the showstoppers, followed closely by Alexandre-Gabriel Decamps and Horace Vernet. While the art chosen for exhibition was limited to that of living artists, the era's most important critics used the exhibition as an opportunity to make sense of the development of French art over the course of the century. The memory of Jacques-Louis David and his followers, such as Antoine-Jean Gros, were invoked as the main historical precedents for the contemporary art on show. Delacroix and Ingres were recognized as descendents of these past masters.

Yet, in spite of these critics' admiration for the best of contemporary art, the future of the French school was nevertheless deemed bleak. On the one hand, critics agreed that Delacroix's highly individualist manner was inimitable and, on the other, that the school of Ingres had merely bred clichéd imitators. As a result, no successor to the great French tradition of history painting could be named. Moreover, many even agreed that this genre of art—long considered the acme of

pictorial achievement since the foundation of the École des Beaux-Arts in the seventeenth century—had gone stale. While critics had already voiced this sentiment a few years earlier—Charles Baudelaire, for instance, in his review of the Salon of 1846 and Théophile Gautier in 1848—the Universal Exhibition seemed to bring home the point that the grand tradition of history painting had reached some kind of dead end.<sup>35</sup> In his review of the exhibition, Maxime du Camp told both of the lack of interest as well as faith in this disappearing genre of art:

The art that reproduces on canvas historical fact doesn't really exist anymore. Painters today no longer know what to choose and to which interpretations to turn. Must they always gravitate towards authors of narratives of antiquity that we care little about? Should they focus on the illustration of religious facts that we no longer believe?....None of them seems to have the air of knowing, and the unfortunate history painting, reduced to the last extremity, appears close to disappearing forever.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Tous les anciens mythes sont à refaire. Les vieux emblèmes ne signifient plus rien. Il faut créer de toutes pièces un vaste symbolisme qui réponde aux idées et aux besoins du temps, théologique, politique et allégorique.” Gautier, “Salon de 1848,” *La Presse* (22 April 1848).

<sup>36</sup> “L’art de reproduire sur la toile un fait historique n’existe réellement plus. Les peintres ne savent plus même aujourd’hui à quoi se décider et vers quelles interprétations se tourner. Doivent-ils toujours graviter autour des récits de l’antiquité dont on ne se soucie guère? Doivent-ils se consacrer à l’illustration de faits religieux auxquels on ne croit plus? Doivent-ils aborder franchement les actions contemporaines, quitter à se tromper et à prendre souvent un engouement passager pour de la célébrité? Nul d’entre eux n’a l’air de la savoir, et la malheureuse peinture historique, réduite à l’extrémité dernière, semble près de disparaître à jamais.” Du Camp, *Les Beaux-arts à l’exposition universelle de 1855*, 14.

Another critic, Charles Perrier, asked pithily what was on everyone's mind: "What will art in France be like in the second half of the nineteenth century?"<sup>37</sup>

If the prognosis for the future of history painting in the grand tradition looked bleak in 1855, then 1867 marked the year of its official death. At the Exhibition Universal at the Champ-de-Mars in Paris the sense of loss was now even more palpable. Charles Blanc, after reviewing the contemporary art at the exhibition, wrote in *Le Temps*: "We can see it clearly today: twelve years have sufficed for us to lose interest in Grand Painting."<sup>38</sup> Other critics stressed the fact that by the time of this exhibition the country had lost an entire generation of history painters, including Paul Delaroche, Horace Vernet and Delacroix among them. Ingres' death in 1867, just on the heels of the Exhibition, punctuated that loss. Du Camp described the moribund scenario: "Since this time, death has been cruel to us, she has struck without pause, slaughtering the best, killing the generals one after the other, widening the gaps that have not yet been filled and leaving our army of artists without leaders, without discipline."<sup>39</sup> Théophile Thoré himself drew a sharp and equally dramatic distinction between the past and (as yet

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<sup>37</sup> "Que sera l'art en France pendant la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième siècle? Nouvelle question qui, je crois, n'est pas sans importance et qu'il n'est pas facile de résoudre. Notre art contemporain est loin d'avoir trouvé sa formule." Perrier, "Exposition universelle des beaux-arts: Peinture-conclusion," *A*, ser. 5, 16, no. 10 (4 November 1855): 129.

<sup>38</sup> "On le voit clairement aujourd'hui: douze années ont suffi pour nous désintéresser de la grande peinture." Blanc, "Exposition universelle de 1867," *Le Temps* (15 May 1867): 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> "Depuis ce temps, la mort a été cruelle pour nous, elle a frappé sans relâche, abattant les meilleurs, tuant les généraux les uns après les autres, creusant les vides qui n'ont point été comblés et laissant notre armée d'artistes sans chefs, sans disciplines." Du Camp, *Les Beaux-arts à l'exposition universelle et aux salons de 1863-1867* (Paris: Ve Jules Renouard, 1867), 334.

unknown) future of the French school: “We are between two worlds...between a world which is ending and a world which is beginning.”<sup>40</sup>

#### 1.4 “*Le genre historique*” and the invention of the naturalist horse

Narratives of French art tend to dramatize the death of *grande peinture* in this manner. But the truth of the matter is that the death of *grande peinture* was of a subtler, more gradual sort. History painting did not die outright, but gradually evolved over the course of a century into a new picture type, one that complexly merged genre—the preferred mode of the period—with the tradition of history painting: “genre historique.”<sup>41</sup> François Chatelain defined the term as follows:

It is no longer the case that to be called a history painter one must limit oneself to working on enormous canvases exclusively dedicated to the representation of Greek or Roman history. Today, more attuned to the evolution of society, we group under the general rubric of ‘historical compositions’ those paintings which recount an actual event, from

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<sup>40</sup> “Nous sommes entre deux mondes...entre un monde qui finit et un monde qui commence.” Thoré, “Exposition universelle de 1867” in *Salons de W. Bürger, 1861 à 1868, avec une préface par T. Thoré*, vol. 2 (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1870), 385. See Patricia Mainardi’s article in which this quotation is cited, “The Death of History Painting in France 1867,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 124.1367 (December 1982): 219.

<sup>41</sup> “[It] appears that the key term *genre historique* was not generally employed much before 1835.” Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe: Art and Ideology In Orleanist France, 1830-1848* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 24. Stephen Bann describes the term as follows: “The Paris Salon had become, by the beginning of the 1830s, a vast and diversified spectacle in which visitors could pick out the scenes derived, on the immediate level, from contemporary historians such as Prosper de Barante and historical novelists such as Sir Walter Scott. A new term had to be invented and popularized in order to cope with this irrepressible intrusion into the traditional hierarchy of the pictorial genres. This would be a hybrid between ‘history painting’ in the grand, Post Renaissance style, and the inferior practice of ‘genre’: hence, the ‘historical genre’ (*genre historique*).” Bann, “Editorial (The Image of History),” *Word & Image* 16.1 (January-March 2000): 1.



whatever history it may have been taken or however large or small its frame.<sup>42</sup>

When Napoleon seized power in 1799, his regime solicited this kind of art to celebrate the victories of its armies. These large-scale paintings of contemporary battles literalized the metaphoric power of *grande peinture* and took history as their subject, yet the events depicted were contemporary and the stylistic idiom was inflected by the devices of genre, by small scale and attention to minor detail. The most famous painters of the Napoleonic regime, such as Carle Vernet and Antoine-Jean Gros, produced such paintings. Rather than presenting an abstracted vision of an allegorized and distant past, their more naturalistically rendered battle scenes detailed the contemporary, familiar and anecdotal, such as accessories of place and uniform.

The image of the horse played a crucial role in the dialectic that motivated such practitioners of historical genre seeking to both update tradition, yet still be part of it. (Gros himself was one of David's best students.) On the one hand, the sheer difficulty of rendering the horse played to genre's emphasis on nature and related notions of *vérité*. But on the other hand, the sheer difficulty of rendering the horse upheld one of the foundational values of *grande peinture*: technical facility.<sup>43</sup> "Not surprisingly," it is for this reason that, as Marc Gotlieb observes,

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<sup>42</sup> Chatelain, "Beaux-Arts: Salon de 1834, Deuxième Article," *Le Voleur* 3.14 (10 March 1834): 218. Translated in Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe*, 24.

<sup>43</sup> For conservative critics of the Academy the horse was also a suitable choice of subject for ambitious historical painting for it was regarded as second in rank to the image of man. Ernest Chesneau writes: "Après l'homme, de tous les êtres créés et doués de soufflé, le plus noble, le

“the list of great French horse painters was almost identical with the canon of great French painters *tout court*.”<sup>44</sup> For Gotlieb, Ernest Meissonier is a prime example of a nineteenth-century painter who aimed to situate himself within this canon by updating the French school of history painting with the idiom of genre, epitomized by his lifelong pursuit of rendering the horse above all else with utmost fidelity. Starting out as a painter of genre scenes Meissonier was well suited to this enterprise—one that, in fact, his predecessors had already begun.

Vernet, whom Napoleon appointed as his official painter, initiated the discussion of this new type of painting wherein genre and history merged across the pictorial field of battle. Vernet’s *Triumph of Paulus Aemilius*, which hung at the Salon of 1789, celebrated the triumphant parade of the emperor Paulus Aemilius after his victory over the Macedonian king Perseus (**fig. 5**). While studiously painted in the neo-classical style of Jacques-Louis David, with quotations of Roman architecture, the central horse that leads the emperor’s chariot marks Vernet’s departure from tradition. Its thick-flowing mane and tail and life-like energy replace the statuesque horse of the seventeenth century with a sense of the horse observed first hand, a horse that one could imagine seeing in the streets of contemporary Paris. As one critic wrote: “Carle possesses an originality of spirit and has resolved to risk revolutionizing the Academy, placing in his

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plus beau esthétiquement, c’est le cheval; aussi est-ce le cheval qui a le plus souvent figuré en compagnie de l’homme, dans les productions de l’art, à toutes les époques.” *La Peinture française au XIXe siècle: Les Chefs d’école* (Paris: Didier et cie., 1862), 169.

<sup>44</sup> Gotlieb, *From Genre to Decoration: Studies in the Theory and Criticism of French Salon Painting, 1850-1900* (Diss. The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1991), 17.

paintings the figures of horses of the kind that he has often admired on his walks in the Bois de Boulogne in Paris.”<sup>45</sup> Another critic noted that it was Vernet’s passion for equine verism that set him apart from the tradition of academic history painting: “All the figures met the demands of the École, but the chariot that trailed the hero was a kind of compensation for the painter, the place that he could caress with a loving brush, and wherein he reveals his personal tendencies.”<sup>46</sup> In his even more ambitious *Battle of Marengo*, of 1806, Vernet adapted the scale of academic battle painting to current events, detailing the actual site of the battle of June 14 1800, reporting on modern warfare, contemporary uniform and presenting an even more vivid image of a rearing horse, albeit a near-mythic one—Napoleon’s famous white Arabian steed.

The military paintings of Gros likewise blurred the distinction between history and genre and the horse played front and center, literally so. For his submission to the first major artistic competition of the Napoleonic era, *The Battle of Nazareth* (1802) (**fig. 6**), Gros recorded the contemporary battle and its outcome: the victory of three hundred French over three thousand Turks and Mameluks. Philippe Chéry describes its most prominent aspect: “The group in the middle forms the foreground; it’s a Turk thrown down from his horse, holding

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<sup>45</sup> “Carle avait de l’originalité dans l’esprit et il résolut, au risque de révolutionner l’Académie, de placer les personnages de son tableau sur des chevaux, tels qu’il les avait souvent admirés dans ses promenades au bois de Boulogne à Paris.” Édouard de Lalaing, *Les Vernet: Joseph, Carle et Horace, Géricault et Delaroche, peintres de l’école française* (Paris: J. Lefort, 1888), 54.

<sup>46</sup> “Tous les personnages étaient-là pour répondre aux exigences de l’école, mais le quadrigue qui traînait le héros était la compensation du peintre, le morceau qu’il pouvait caresser d’un pinceau amoureux, et dans lequel devaient se révéler ses tendances personnelles.” Amédée Durand, *Joseph, Carle et Horace Vernet: Correspondance et biographies* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1864), 52.

onto his flag with all his strength, which a dragoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> wants to seize from him...this group is best.”<sup>47</sup> In spite of his puzzlement, Chéry proceeds to touch on the terms of Gros’s achievement, asking of this grouping: “But must it by itself make the painting? Must the entire scene be subordinated to it?”<sup>48</sup> “Accidents of the action” or “accessories to the principal actions” were the words critics used to describe the unusual prominence that Gros gave to this peripheral detail of a rider dismounted by his horse. This was the kind of particularity suited to the “slice-of-life” aesthetic of genre.

Influenced by the example of Vernet and Gros, the next generation of French painters, such as Horace Vernet (Carle Vernet’s son) and Hippolyte Delaroche, continued to synthesize Napoleonic battle painting’s opposing elements under Louis-Philippe’s July Monarchy. Delaroche’s *Bonaparte Crossing the Alps* (1850) (**fig. 7**), for instance, both draws on and reinvents David’s famous equestrian portrait of the same scene (1801-2) (**fig. 8**), adding to his version the reality effects of genre that he gleaned from the anecdotal descriptions of Adolphe Thiers’s popular *History of the Consulate and Empire* (1845). “These facts are rendered with a fidelity that has not omitted the plait of a drapery, the shaggy texture of the four-footed animal, nor a detail of the harness on his back.”<sup>49</sup> In

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<sup>47</sup> Philippe Chéry, “Beaux-Arts. Peinture. Aux artistes qui ne déshonorent pas ce titre,” *Journal des bâtiments civils* (14 December 1801): 389-90. Translated in Susan Locke Siegfried, “Naked History: The Rhetoric of Military Painting in Postrevolutionary France,” *Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 250.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> This was written by an English critic for *The Athenaeum* on the occasion of the painting’s exhibition in London in 1850. Cited in *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and*

place of the red, billowing cape of David, Delaroche's Napoleon wears a grey, wind-caught tunic. In place of David's noble steed whose reins the emperor grips, Delaroche's Napoleon rides a more humble mule. This hybrid animal—part horse, part mule—exemplifies something of the fusion of genre's more humble aspect with the grandeur of traditional history.

When Meissonier himself took up the subject of Napoleonic battle painting, in the tradition of Gros and Delaroche, he also applied the genre-derived aesthetic for which he was famous to his historical subjects. *The Campaign of France, 1814*, of 1864 (**fig. 9**), for instance, whose small-format was unusual for a history painting yet well suited to the descriptive character of genre, details Napoleon's journey, down to the distended veins and stiffened joints of the horse's weary gait. The artist's most ardent supporters, like Charles Beaurin, a critic for *L'Artiste*, praised:

M. Meissonier moves from genre painting where he had been confined to history painting; he seems to have yielded to a vocation long restrained. His paintings remain small, but never has canvas expressed the grandeur of history.<sup>50</sup>

Théophile Gautier made a comparable observation about the artist's *Battle of Solferino* of 1864: "In spite of its small size the Emperor at Solferino is a true

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*Art*, Volume 22, eds. John Holmes Agnew and Henry T. Steele (New York: Leavitt, Trow, & Co., 1851), 144.

<sup>50</sup> "M. Meissonier passe du tableau de genre où il s'était renfermé au tableau d'histoire; et il semble avoir cédé à une vocation longtemps contenue. Ses toiles restent petites, mais jamais toile n'a exprimé plus grandement l'histoire." Beaurin, "Une Date dans l'histoire de l'art: Les Salons de 1864 et de 1865," *L'Artiste* (15 April 1866): 147.

history painting even though this designation is usually given to large canvases in which there is little sense of reality.”<sup>51</sup> Recognizing that Meissonier’s skill in depicting the horse played a key role in his interpretation of a new kind of history painting, as it had for Vernet and Delaroche, Marc de Montifaud praised a small-scale equestrian portrait of Napoleon similarly: “With certainty, M. Meissonier has today elevated genre to the height to history.”<sup>52</sup>

### 1.5 The development of “historical genre” and its detractors

Of course, not all praised the new breed of history painting that Meissonier’s art came to exemplify. Many regarded it as indicative of the general loss of ambition in French history painting, a common refrain of Salon criticism especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. Critics noted that the small size of Meissonier’s paintings fed the bourgeois market too well and that their descriptive realism pandered to the crowd’s predilection for visual pleasure. According to Jules Antoine: “He has only ever had a vulgar conception of the events he has treated in paint which justifies and explains the success and popular admiration he has met.”<sup>53</sup> A similar critique had been leveled against his

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<sup>51</sup> “L’Empereur à Solferino est, malgré sa petite dimension, un véritable tableau *d’histoire*, bien que ce nom ne s’accorde ordinairement qu’à de grandes toiles où il n’y a rien de réel.” Gautier, “L’Art contemporain: Meissonier, peintre d’histoire,” *L’Artiste* (15 August 1865): 75.

<sup>52</sup> “Ce qu’il y a de certain, c’est qu’aujourd’hui M. Meissonier a élevé le genre à la hauteur de l’histoire.” De Montifaud, “Le Salon de 1867 III,” *L’Artiste* (1 July 1867): 102.

<sup>53</sup> “Il n’a eu, des événements qu’il a traités en peinture, qu’une conception vulgaire, ce qui, d’ailleurs, justifie et explique le succès et l’admiration populaire qu’il a rencontrés.” Antoine, “J. L. E. Meissonier,” *Revue indépendante* 18 (February 1891): 228.

predecessors whose representations, it was often felt, failed to do justice to historical events. The critic Boutard observed of Gros's *Battle of Nazareth*:

Composed of five principal groups hardly related to each other, of which four are merely accidents of the action....Of these four groups, each one of which would make the subject of an interesting painting, there are given in the program, and no doubt the particular actions they represent would embellish, in history, the narrative of the battle of Nazareth, by appearing as accessories to the principal actions, successively and without hindering each other.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to criticizing Gros for giving centrality to peripheral events and thereby undermining the principal narrative, Boutard here also criticizes the painting's lack of a sustained narrative according the rules of Davidian neoclassicism.

Horace Vernet's *Battle of Jena* (1836), commissioned for the Galerie des Batailles, met similar criticism. Extending even further the anecdotal aspects of Gros's historical paintings, in Vernet's painting Napoleon turns to acknowledge the salutation of a common soldier, off at the sidelines, as he rides along the grassy fields near Jena. Victor de Novion criticized the narrative failure of this kind of history painting: "One can shift around indiscriminately the titles of *Jena*,

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<sup>54</sup> "Elle est composée de cinq groupes principaux peu liés les uns aux autres, et dont quatre ne sont que des accidens de l'action....De ces quatre groupes dont chacun feroit le sujet d'un tableau intéressant, trios sont donnés par le programme, et sans doute les actions particulières qu'ils représentent embelliront, dans l'histoire, le récit de la bataille de Nazareth, en s'y montrant comme accessoires de l'action principale, successivement, et sans se nuire les unes aux autres." J.B. Boutard, "Variétés, Salon de l'an IX. [No.] XII," *Journal des débats et loix du pouvoir législatif, et actes du gouvernement* (23-24 September 1801): 2. Translated in Siegfried, "Naked History," 249.

*Friedland*, and *Wagram* without causing historical truth to suffer any noticeable damage.”<sup>55</sup>

In spite of the criticism leveled against these historical paintings, those of Delaroche’s pupil, Jean-Léon Gérôme, marked the extent of genre’s new reach, beyond historical battle painting into the domain of traditional history painting, especially into the preserve of historical tragedy. Gérôme’s *Death of Caesar* (fig. 10), exhibited at the Salon of 1859, redefined the pictorial norms of historical tragedy, augmenting or replacing them with those of genre: critics puzzled over the fact that they could not make out the “extraordinarily animated expression” of Caesar<sup>56</sup>—the pained *grimace* in traditional history painting—and at the ways that the “sensation of silence”<sup>57</sup> and arrested movement replaced the declamatory gesture. The critic Alexandre Dumas noted that Gérôme focused on the details of

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<sup>55</sup> “Au reste, on peut sans inconvénient transporter indifféremment de l’un à l’autre les titres d’Iéna, de Friedland ou de Wagram, sans que la vérité historique ait en rien à en souffrir.” De Nouvion, “Salon de 1836,” *La France littéraire* 24 (15 April 1836): 296. Translated in Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe*, 168.

<sup>56</sup> “Comment ne sait-il pas que César, tué à coups de poignard, à quelques minutes seulement de son trépas, doit conserver une expression extraordinairement animée, celle qu’il avait au moment où on le frappait.” Jules-Antoine Castagnary, “Salon de 1859” in *Salons (1857-1870): Avec une préface de Eugène Spuller et un portrait à l’eau-forte de Bracquemond*, vol. 1 (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1892), 96. Another critic wrote: “La figure est bien inventée, mais elle est insuffisante d’expression.” Maurice Aubert, *Souvenirs du Salon de 1859: Contenant une appréciation de la plupart des œuvres admises à cette Exposition des Beaux-Arts* (Paris: Jules Tardieu, 1859), 105. Gérôme’s *Pollice Verso* (1872) was frequently criticized on similar grounds. “Le groupe des gladiateurs qui vient le saluer est bien disposé; mais pourquoi leur couvrir le visage d’un casque? Ce casque, je le sais, existe dans le musée de Naples, il est irréprochable comme archéologie; mais si vrai que soit un casque, j’aime mieux un visage. Celui de ces hommes qui vont mourir doit être beau à voir.” Alexandre Dumas, *L’Art et les artistes contemporains au Salon de 1859* (Paris: A. Bourdilliat, 1859), 42.

<sup>57</sup> “Cette toile, chose singulière pour une oeuvre plastique dont l’appréciation tombe directement sous le sens de la vue, produit une impression de silence; l’épouvante en passant par là a emporté tous les bruits, et sans ces piédestaux et ce siège renversé, je croirais voir un grand caveau funèbre.” Du Camp, *Le Salon de 1859* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1859), 70.



interior décor, like the intricate *trompe l'oeil* effects of the elaborate mosaic floor, at the expense of conveying the instructional message of traditional history painting.<sup>58</sup> The critic Étienne-Jean Delécluze observed that Gérôme seemed to pay more care to these details than to Caesar himself, a corpse ignominiously on the floor, hidden by drapery.

It is voluntarily and with the intention to express an *idea* the end of which, it has to be confessed, escapes us that the artist has presented a painting in quite large dimension in which the eye is initially pulled in to depth by an immense marble tiling, while a very small space is occupied by drapery under which one can suppose that a corpse is hidden.<sup>59</sup>

About thirty years earlier, Delaroche's historical paintings of tragedy, which inspired Gérôme's, had similarly disturbed the critics for having treated death as a mere anecdote. In his *Assassination of the Duc de Guise* (1832) Delaroche describes the Duke's death as just one of many visual facts in an elaborately decorated interior. And like Gérôme's Caesar, the Duke's corpse lies on the ground, unattended by those in the same room. In Delaroche's *Cromwell*

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<sup>58</sup> "Ce qui diminuerait peut-être cet effet et cette grandeur, c'est une beauté de détail, c'est ce fauteuil renversé qui me dit plus de choses peut-être que ce cadavre couché." Dumas, *L'Art et les artistes contemporains*, 39. Again, Gérôme's *Pollice Verso* met the same criticism. "N'y a-t-il pas dans cette peinture une trop minutieuse recherche de détails secondaires? L'architecture ne prend-elle pas un peu trop d'importance dans les lointains surtout, et n'empiète-t-elle pas sur le sujet?" Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> "C'est volontairement et dans l'intention d'exprimer une *idée* dont le fin mot nous est échappé, il faut l'avouer, que l'artiste a présenté un tableau d'une assez grande dimension, où l'oeil est d'abord attiré par un immense carrelage de marbre, dont un très petit espace est occupé par une draperie sous laquelle on peut supposer qu'est caché un cadavre." Delécluze, "Exposition de 1859 (Premier article)," *Journal des débats, politiques, et littéraires* (27 April 1859), n.p. Translated in Gülru Çakmak, "The Salon of 1859 and Caesar: The Limits of Painting" in *Reconsidering Gérôme* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2010), 68.

*Before the Coffin of Charles I* (1831) (**fig. 11**), Cromwell looks down at the monarch lying in the coffin, “motionless,” not unlike the senator in Gérôme’s *Caesar*.<sup>60</sup> This image of death is as “brutal as fact,”<sup>61</sup> Heinrich Heine wrote, and Delacroix, more severely, deemed it “meaningless”: “He lifted the lid of the coffin of his victim like the lid of a snuffbox.”<sup>62</sup> Like those critics who sought an animated expression in Gérôme’s *Caesar* but found none, Gustave Planche saw only the inscrutability of Delaroche’s *Cromwell*: “I defy anyone to distinguish, to detect the feelings and thoughts with which the painter wished to animate his physiognomy.”<sup>63</sup>

Caesar, Cromwell, Duc de Guise—these are but singular instances of what was a wide-spread rethinking of *grande peinture*, specifically in terms of its affiliation with genre during the first half of the nineteenth century, from Vernet and Gros to Delaroche and down to Meissonier and Gérôme, as I have traced it. In different ways, all took part in the evolving trajectory of the Napoleonic phase of painting that gave rise to the reinvention of historical representation. Absence

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<sup>60</sup> “Un homme immobile.” Horace de Viel-Castel, “*Cromwell* par M. Delaroche,” *L’Artiste* I (1831): 270.

<sup>61</sup> “La figure de son Cromwell n’exprime ni étonnement, ni stupéfaction, ni agitation quelconque de l’âme; tout au contraire, le spectateur est remué par l’aspect du calme effrayant et horrible du visage de cet homme. Elle nous apparaît, cette figure, ferme et assurée, *brutale comme un fait*, puissant sans pathétique, démoniaque et naturelle, merveilleusement ordinaire, et elle considère son ouvrage comme un bûcheron qui vient d’abattre un chêne.” Heine, “Salon de 1831,” *De la France* (Paris: Eugène Renduel, 1833), 340-1.

<sup>62</sup> “Le tableau de Delaroche est un non-sens. Il est évident que Cromwell ne serait jamais venu de propos délibéré, et poussé par je ne sais quelle curiosité malsaine, cynique, soulève le couvercle du cercueil de sa victime, *comme celui d’une tabatière*.” Cited in Beth Wright, “Delaroche’s *Cromwell* and the historians,” *Word & Image* 16:1 (January-March 2000): 85-6.

<sup>63</sup> “Je défie, en effet, qu’on devine et qu’on surprenne les sentiments et les pensées dont le peintre a voulu animer sa physionomie.” Planche, *Salon de 1831: Ébauches critiques* (Paris: A. J. Dénain, 1831), 129-30.

instead of readability, deadpan instead of *grimace*, stillness instead of action, detail instead of abstraction, the quotidian instead of the grand—all of these aspects reflect various attempts to revise traditional history painting in an effort to respond to some of the issues that challenged its existence. History, viewed as a series of singular, dramatic moments, conveying eternally valid truths, now failed to inspire the faith of its viewers as much as its modes of pictorial expression now failed to move them.

### **1.6 *The Steeplechase*, a new interpretation**

Degas's early career took shape against this background, poised between the loss of history painting and the ascendancy of genre. Looking at the art of his formative years we witness Degas's acute awareness and internalization of the course of ambitious French painting as it developed over the course of the century: from his first history painting—*The Daughter of Jephthah* (1859-61), of the tragic narrative from the *Book of Judges*—to historical genre—*The Young Spartans* (1860-2), likely of “young girls and young boys wrestling in the plane-tree grove, under the eyes of the aged Lycurgus”<sup>64</sup>—and finally to genre—*The Interior* (1868-9), of some kind of mysterious encounter between a man and woman in a domestic interior. *The Steeplechase* was born during these years of experimentation.

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<sup>64</sup> “Jeunes filles et jeunes garçons luttant dans le Plataniste sous les yeux de Lycurgue vieux à coté des mères.” Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 202.

While art historians, as I outlined earlier, generally consider *The Steeplechase* to be Degas's first genre painting of contemporary Parisian life, I do not think this is *entirely* right. For one, *The Steeplechase* offers neither indications of contemporary time nor place. The narrative (if it may be called one) of a rider dismounted by his horse does not in itself specify the fashionable French sport; significantly, Degas omits from our field of view both the steeplechase and the steeplechase mount that the horse has presumably just jumped.<sup>65</sup>

Given the lack of details of narrative, time and place, *The Steeplechase* might seem even further from the tradition of history than genre. Certainly, *The Steeplechase* marks a departure from the historical painting that Degas exhibited at the Salon a year earlier, *Scene of War in the Middle Ages* (1865) (**fig. 13**). Yet, *The Steeplechase* does nevertheless seem to be related to history painting, or at least a kind of historical painting. ("My genre painting" was how Degas referred to *The Interior*, a painting that, in contrast, obviously departs from the tradition of history painting, as Degas's naming of it presumably aims to emphasize.) Like a strange, unsettling afterimage, its iconographic elements trace the shadowy contours of past battle scenes with its horses and dismounted, uniformed figures set against an expanse of green grass. Indeed, Degas used the same cast and stage—riders, fallen victims and horses set in a barren landscape—in his *Scene of*

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<sup>65</sup> When we contextualize Degas's image alongside others of the steeplechase subject at the Salon during the period, we see that they typically represent a panoramic sweep of the field, often with spectators in view (**fig. 12**). This is based on the English precedent for depicting the sport. Kimberly Jones cites several examples of this kind of image type in her essay on the subject of the steeplechase in French painting. Jones, "A Day at the Races: A Brief History of Horse Racing in France" in Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, 208-18.

*War in the Middle Ages*. The generic, flat profiles of the mounted riders recall the anonymous soldiers of so many battle paintings. That there are more horses than riders suggests the disorder of battle, not the organized world of the race. Not surprisingly, when Émile Zola himself stood before the painting at the Salon of 1866 it does not seem that he saw in Degas's imagery a convergence of interests with his own predilection for modern life. He makes no mention of it in his review of the Salon that year.

As neither quite history nor genre, but some kind of fusion of the two, I think that *The Steeplechase* signals its affiliation with none other than the pictorial form that itself first merged the two: historical genre. Through a close visual analysis of the painting (allied with an awareness of the discursive concerns that arose out of the Salon) we see that Degas's painting even internalizes the criticisms of this genre of art, of those paintings by Gros and Delaroche and Gérôme, and of almost every painter of historical genre in their quest to forge a historical art of the present. We know that Degas shared their ambition. In his notebooks of these years we hear his of yearning for an art wherein past and present quixotically meet. "Oh Giotto! Let me see Paris, and you, Paris, let me see Giotto!"<sup>66</sup> "Make of the *tête d'expression* a study of modern feeling."<sup>67</sup>

("What you really want is to ask the Sphinx for the secret of our time and Prometheus for the sacred fire of the present age," Edmond Duranty wrote in *The*

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<sup>66</sup> "Ah! Giotto! laisse-moi voir Paris, et toi, Paris, laisse moi voir Giotto!" Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 5.

<sup>67</sup> "Faire de la tête d'expression une étude du sentiment moderne." Quoted in Theodore Reff, *Degas: The Artist's Mind* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), 217.

*New Painting*, a text that served in part as brief for the artists of his generation, Degas not least among them.<sup>68</sup>) Internalizing—or better, preempting—over a half century’s worth of Salon criticism of historical genre may have seemed to Degas his best defense against it, the most effective means by which to neutralize or even liquidate the criticism in his own quest to forge a historical art of the present.

*The Steeplechase*, then, literalizes what so offended Boutard about Gros’s choice of subject matter for his *Battle of Nazareth*: it is “merely [those] accidents of the action.” The painting preempts other criticisms as well. The most common complaint of historical genre was that the anecdotal narratives of these realist paintings lacked the pictorial unity needed to succeed as large-scale, self-sufficient *tableaux*.<sup>69</sup> Boutard’s criticism of Gros’s *Nazareth* was related to this failing; with its various, accessory groupings, those “accidents of the action,” it lacked the powerful, centralized focus of the fully-realized *tableau* of traditional history painting. De la Rochemore criticized Gérôme’s *Age of Augustus* (1852) similarly:

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<sup>68</sup> “Eh! savez-vous pourquoi vous le faites? C’est pour demander au Sphinx, sans vous en douter, le secret de notre temps, et à Prométhée le feu sacré de l’âge actuel.” Duranty, *La nouvelle peinture* (Paris: Éditions du Boucher, 2002), 8. Translated in Duranty, “The New Painting: Concerning the Group of Artists Exhibiting at the Durand-Ruel Galleries” in Charles Moffett, *The New Painting, Impressionism 1874-1886: an Exhibition Organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco with the National Gallery of Art, Washington* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986), 40.

<sup>69</sup> Alphonse de Calonne wrote of Isidore Pils’s *Bataille de l’Alma* (1861): “Beaucoup de vérité, beaucoup de verve, une grande variété de physionomies, un bon dessin, un coloris d’une certaine fermeté et en quelques parties d’une remarquable finesse, mettent cette grande toile bien au-dessus de la plupart des peintures analogues dont sont ornés les murs de Versailles.... Mais tout cela ne constitue pas de la grande peinture, de la peinture monumentale; c’est de la peinture anecdotique sur une grande échelle. Nous n’y rencontrons point cette grande ordonnance que les anciens introduisaient dans les compositions de ce genre au préjudice parfois de l’exactitude historique.” “La Peinture contemporaine à l’exposition de 1861,” *Revue contemporaine* 21 (31 May 1861): 352.

“It is impossible to distinguish anything or to understand much in this avalanche of pagan society which teems pell-mell on this huge canvas; it is a horrible mess, an unprecedented confusion!”<sup>70</sup> In other words, the “slice-of-life” aesthetic of realist genre transcribed the scene but did not effectively structure it. The frequent criticism of Gérôme’s *Caesar*, that it seemed like “only a half or even a quarter of a tableau” related to this same problem of pictorial unity.<sup>71</sup> Something of *The Steeplechase*’s compositional oddity seems to deliberately court this criticism as well: it, too, seems like a detail cut from a more complete painting. The proximity of the scene, coupled with the immensity of the canvas, and the way in which the horses and riders cut across the picture plane, unframed by its borders, further this impression. As does the feeling that there might lie other riders beyond our field of vision, given that there are two dismounted horses, but only one fallen rider in view. *The Steeplechase* literalizes the ultimate verdict of those paintings that failed to realize the pictorial unity of history painting. Du Camp’s assessment of Thomas Couture’s *Romans of the Decadence* (1847) is applicable: “In reality it is

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<sup>70</sup> “Il est impossible de rien distinguer ni d’en comprendre davantage dans cette avalanche de sociétés païennes qui grouillent pêle-mêle sur cette immense toile; c’est un désordre affreux, une confusion inouïe!” J. de la Rochenoire, *Le Salon de 1855* (Paris: Martinon, 1855), 81-2.

<sup>71</sup> “La timidité de M. Gérôme l’a perdu: en ne montrant qu’une partie des choses, en coupant maladroitement les colonnes dont on n’aperçoit que la base, il a disloqué sa composition, il a fait non un tableau, mais la moitié ou le quart d’un tableau, et c’est pour cela sans doute que, devant son *César*, le spectateur éprouve un sentiment de malaise dont il ne sait trop comment se rendre raison.” Paul Mantz, “Salon de 1859: Deuxième article,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 2, no. 4 (15 May 1859): 199-200. In fact, it probably was a detail of the artist’s more expansive rendering of the scene, *The Death of Caesar*, which he exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in 1867.

a large genre painting.”<sup>72</sup> *The Steeplechase* is an oversized genre painting or, at least, this is its pretense.

*The Steeplechase* also points to the common lament that artists had now mistakenly transformed “la peinture anecdotique” into “les grandes toiles.”<sup>73</sup> Genre paintings, critics said, were much too large, or out of scale: “The same history, and other subjects which hitherto seemed to demand the largest dimensions, often shrink to the size of ordinary genre paintings; on the other hand, genre painting sometimes takes the proportions of history painting.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly Du Camp said:

We must not fail to speak of the unfortunate tendency that has lured certain artists, the tendency to excessively enlarge their canvases. It is foolish to give small genre paintings the absolute dimensions of history.<sup>75</sup>

The large size of these paintings was often attributed to the public that gave rise to the popularity of genre itself, a public uneducated in the idealist aims of an older art and thus prone to mistake size for ambition. The Salon, it was said, was now in

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<sup>72</sup> “En réalité ce n’est qu’un grand tableau de genre.” This was Calonne’s criticism of Isidore Pils’s *Bataille de l’Alma* (1861). Du Camp, *Les Beaux-arts à l’exposition universelle de 1855* (Paris: Librairie nouvelle, 1855), 186.

<sup>73</sup> Calonne, “La Peinture contemporaine à l’Exposition de 1861,” 352.

<sup>74</sup> “L’histoire même, et les autres sujets qui semblaient jusqu’alors réclamer nécessairement les plus larges dimensions, se rapetissent souvent à la taille ordinaire des peintures de genre; mais, en revanche, la peinture de genre prend quelquefois les proportions de la peinture d’histoire.” Victor Fournel, *Les Artistes français contemporains* (Tours: Alfred Mame et fils, 1884), 534.

<sup>75</sup> “Nous ne devons pas omettre de parler d’une tendance fâcheuse à laquelle certains artistes se laissent entraîner, la tendance à agrandir démesurément leurs tableaux. Il est puéril de donner à de petits tableaux de genre des dimensions absolument historiques.” Du Camp, *Le Salon de 1861* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle, 1861), 6-7.



the hands of the “large flock of sheep...which we call the Public.”<sup>76</sup> Degas’s choice of subject matter, coupled with its size, seems to assimilate these kinds of criticisms as well, of pandering to the crowd and the dictates of fashion. The steeplechase, after all, is a spectator sport.

Degas’s *Steeplechase* also internalizes the circumstances to which critics attributed the rise of genre, such as thematic flexibility. Writing in reference to the Salon of 1869, Théophile Gautier tried to account for the overwhelming number of genre paintings:

Genre, which is like the novel of painting, has taken a peculiar extension in our day and there is scarcely any subject which it does not include in its restricted frame. It touches on everything: scenes of contemporary customs, the resurrection of centuries past in legend, chronicle, history itself; it has been made into a neo-Greek, a traveler, a realist, a military man, a sportsman; all costumes suit it well; it dons the red coat of the fox hunter or antique drapery, it goes to the Pompeian atrium or the boudoirs of regency. The old boundaries are effaced to the point that they can no longer be found by the critic.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “Ce grand troupeau de moutons de Panurge qu’on appelle le Public.” Eugène Véron, “Quelques mots sur la situation de l’art en France,” *L’Art* 7 (1876): 84-5.

<sup>77</sup> “Le genre, qui est comme le roman de la peinture, a pris de nos jours une singulière extension, et il n’est guère des sujets qu’il n’englobe dans ses cadres restreints. Il touche à tout: aux scènes de mœurs actuelles, aux résurrections des siècles passés à la légende, à la chronique, à l’histoire même; il s’était fait néo-grec, voyageur, réaliste, militaire, sportsman; tout les costumes lui sont bons; il revêt l’habit rouge du fox hunter ou la draperie antique, il va de l’atrium pompéien aux boudoirs de la régence. Les anciennes démarcations s’effacent au point de ne pouvoir plus être retrouvées par la critique.” Gautier, “Salon de 1869” in *Tableaux à la plume* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1880), 277. The object of Gautier’s praise is Jules Elie Delaunay’s *Peste à Rome* (1869).

Eugène Guillaume wrote similarly: “Genre painting, considered as a whole, touches on all subjects at once. It takes from everything: it involves religion as history, fantasy as daily life.”<sup>78</sup> *The Steeplechase* pictorializes what these critics describe as genre’s ability to be various things. Albeit a scene of contemporary leisure its iconographic elements are haunted by the memory of past images of battle.

If Degas intended to disarm his critics by assimilating the critical polemic that took shape in response to the new mode of historical representation, namely those criticisms of the damage done to serious painting by its Napoleonic phase, the strategy may have worked too well, silencing the critics by preempting the very terms of their critique: as devoid of emotion, too factual, anecdotal, quotidian. For in spite of Degas’s hope of winning attention, the painting received only a modicum of it. Edmond About was succinct in his praise of its “brisk and lively composition.”<sup>79</sup> Another, anonymous critic spared only a few more words, praising “the clarity and delicacy of tone” yet criticizing the young artist’s treatment of the horse: “Like the jockey, this painter is not yet entirely familiar with his horse.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> “La peinture de genre, prise dans son ensemble, touche à tous les sujets à la fois. Elle prend partout son bien: elle met à contribution la religion comme l’histoire, la fantaisie comme la vie journalière.” Guillaume, “L’Art et la nature (Salon de 1879)” in *Études d’art antique et moderne* (Paris: Perrin et cie., 1888), 199-200.

<sup>79</sup> “*Le Jockey tombé*, composition leste et vivante de M. de Gas.” About, *Salon de 1866* (Paris: Hachette, 1867), 229. Translated in Boggs, *Degas*, 123.

<sup>80</sup> “La limpidité et la finesse du Ton traitée un peu dans le genre anglais”; “Comme ce jockey, le peintre ne connaît pas encore parfaitement son cheval.” Cited in Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 206. Translated in Boggs, *Degas*, 123.

Degas's definitive turn to genre painting the following year must indicate Degas's awareness that his strategy had no future, and, moreover that his desire to reconcile the historical and contemporary (or to express his equal allegiance to both the modern and traditional) had no real footing; at this juncture all that could be achieved was a strange awkward fusion. In this cleft, the ambiguity of the jockey's state as we see it—is he dead or not yet dead?—points to the Baudelairean nature of Degas's struggle “to be a painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.”<sup>81</sup> The jockey lies *between* a momentary lapse of consciousness and eternal sleep. While Duranty might have found in the Egyptian carving the truth of the modern era, likening the Egyptian use of wood to the modern puppet,<sup>82</sup> when Degas himself assessed the art that he saw around him, in the late years of the 1860s, he was unequivocal: “We have yet to find a composition that paints our time.”<sup>83</sup> For Degas, success of this sort was yet to come.

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<sup>81</sup> “Il est le peintre de la circonstance et de tout ce qu'elle suggère d'éternel.” Charles Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la vie moderne” in *Curiosités esthétiques: Salon 1845-1859* (Paris: M. Lévy, 1868), 457. Degas read Baudelaire's essays throughout the 1860s, some of which he borrowed from Manet's library. McMullen, *Degas*, 139.

<sup>82</sup> “Ces statues du fameux Dédale et de ses héritiers étaient des personnages sculptés en bois dont les jambes s'écartaient en imitant le mouvement de la marche, comme celles enfin d'un être humain, sans être engagées dans un bloc de support, et dont les bras articulés avec le buste, ainsi que ceux d'une moderne poupée, se mouvaient, librement détachés du corps. ...La jambe droite du moulage de Schafrà égale presque, par la vérité et le soin du rendu, une sculpture moderne.” Duranty, “Promenades du Louvre. Remarques à propos de l'art égyptien,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 20 (1 August 1879): 136-8.

<sup>83</sup> “...[il] reste à trouver une composition qui peigne notre temps.” Degas wrote this in 1856. Jean Sutherland Boggs, “Degas Notebooks at the Bibliothèque Nationale II, Group B (1858-1861),” *Burlington Magazine* 663 (June 1958): 200-1.

### 1.7 The death of tragedy? Manet's *Dead Toreador* and Gérôme's *Death of Caesar*

Linda Nochlin has argued that images of death from the mid nineteenth century represent artists' efforts to distance themselves from the "outworn rhetoric of transcendental implication."<sup>84</sup> Situating death within the quotidian was part of this project: "Embedding it [death] so firmly and irrevocably in the context of contemporary daily experience...the nineteenth-century artist...severs its transcendental connections and posits the non-value of the dead person and the meaninglessness of his experience."<sup>85</sup> Nochlin adds that the commitment to "temporal brevity" was part of these artists' broader project to strip death of meaning.<sup>86</sup>

At times, it is not so much the object-filled space of death but rather the temporal brevity of its occurrence...It is the instantaneousness of the image—dying as it appears to the eye at a given moment...[that] deprives this momentous occasion of its traditional significance.<sup>87</sup>

Nochlin cites Degas's *Steeplechase* as paradigmatic of such nineteenth-century paintings, adding that it is "rather akin, in its reference to death as an incident in the contemporary sporting world, to Manet's *Dead Toreador*" (**fig. 14**). She

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<sup>84</sup> Nochlin, *Realism*, 70.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-1.

continues: “This same isolation of the fact of death from a context of transcendental significance or value characterizes Manet’s *Dead Toreador*.”<sup>88</sup>

Nochlin, of course, is right to cite Manet as an influence in an analysis of Degas’s *Steeplechase*. Degas had the opportunity to see *The Dead Toreador* at the Martinet Gallery in 1865. A year earlier, he would have seen the original version of the painting as it hung at the Salon, entitled *An Incident in a Bull Ring* (**fig. 15**). There is certainly a thematic and formal affinity between *The Steeplechase* and *An Incident*: in both, the fallen figure in the foreground lies against a background of figures in action, and, in each, the well-groomed and costumed figure is prone on a diagonal within an expansive tilted field. Nochlin’s conclusion that both Manet and Degas’s paintings foreground the “meaninglessness” of death, however, seems to miss the mark, overlooking as it does a long-standing set of *pictorial* problems in French painting to do with the representation of death and its affiliation with tragedy in the modern era. For some artists, suggestions of the “everyday” and of “temporal brevity”—those conventional features of genre—were the very strategies by which they sought to make the representation of death *meaningful* in the modern era, in Stendhal’s words, to give to “our contemporaries...the kind of tragedy that they need.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>89</sup> “Le romantiques ne conseillent à personne d’imiter directement les drames de Shakespeare. Ce qu’il faut imiter de ce grand homme, c’est la manière d’étudier le monde au milieu duquel nous vivons, et l’art de donner à nos contemporains précisément le genre de tragédie dont ils ont besoin.” Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare*, ed. P. Martino, vol. 2 (Paris: Champion, 1925), 39.

There is likely a specific source to which Manet turned when he conceived *Incident in a Bullring*. Identifying that source helps contextualize his treatment of death as a response to a specific pictorial tradition, that is, as an engagement with death as much, or more, pictorial than philosophical. When *An Incident* hung at the Salon, Thoré identified the source of the motif of Manet's fallen figure—"copied from a masterpiece in the Pourtalès collection"—and suspected that he saw this seventeenth-century Spanish masterpiece of a dead warrior lying across the interior of a cave "through some intermediary or other."<sup>90</sup> That intermediary has long been identified as Gérôme's *Dead Caesar*.<sup>91</sup> The affinity between Gérôme and Manet's figure is obvious: in both, a foreshortened figure lies supine on a diagonal with legs splayed, one hand resting elegantly—if he were in control of his gesture, we would think with a practiced negligence—on his chest.

If Manet looked to Gérôme's reworking of the Spanish masterpiece in the Pourtalès collection, his own reworking of it points to a critical difference

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<sup>90</sup> "Ce toréador, éventré pour le plaisir de quelques milliers de spectateurs affolés est une figure de grandeur naturelle, audacieusement copiée d'après un chef-d'oeuvre de la galerie Pourtalès."; "...pour l'homme étendu mort dans le cirque des taureaux, il est impossible que Manet n'ait pas eu quelque 'seconde vue,' par des intermédiaires quelconques, s'il n'a pas visité la galerie Pourtalès où est le chef-oeuvre de Velazquez." (At the time, Velázquez was thought to have painted the dead warrior in the Pourtalès collection.) Thoré, *Salons de W. Bürger, 1861 à 1868*, vol. 2 (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1870), 98, 137-8.

<sup>91</sup> Gérôme visited the Galerie Pourtalès when he travelled to Spain. His *Ave Caesar*, exhibited at the Salon of 1859, includes details from the famous gladiatorial armor in its collections. Gerald Ackerman writes that the contemporary critic, Henri Dumesnil, was first to note the connection between Gérôme and the Pourtalès figure. See Dumesnil, *Le Salon de 1859* (Paris: Jules Renouard 1859), 88-94 and Ackerman, "Gérôme and Manet," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 70 (September 1967): 167, 176. Also see Bates Lowry, *Muse or Ego: Salon and Independent Artists of the 1880's: 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition* (Claremont, California: Pomona College Gallery, 1963), 33. (Manet might have looked to Gérôme again when he depicted his victim of the French commune in an etching of 1871. This image of a contemporary, ignominious death strongly recalls Gérôme's image of the death of Marshal Ney, exhibited at the Salon of 1868 under the title, *December 7, 1815, 9 o'clock in the Morning*.)

regarding the intersection of genre and ambitious painting in which the depiction of death had figured so centrally. Painted in the aftermath of the Salon of 1858, at which critics lamented the passing of history and tragedy, Gérôme's *Caesar* represented a serious effort to convey the tragic proportions of the historical event.<sup>92</sup> In drawing on the character of genre—the incidental being one—Gérôme's ignominious representation of death was meant to render the Emperor's death all the more tragic. In contrast, Manet's *Incident* seems motivated by the same spirit as his other painting at the Salon of 1864, *The Dead Christ with Angels*, which critics understood as deliberate farce, one painted “no doubt as a kind of sarcasm.”<sup>93</sup> With the help of a contemporary cartoon and published verbal criticism we can reconstruct Manet's original composition as it hung at the Salon: lying in the foreground of the circular space of an arena we see a toreador dressed in Spanish costume; a faint trickle of blood drips down his cheek; in the distance a bullfight scene is being enacted. In addition to the decidedly unheroic subject of sport, the play of small fighters in the background diminishes the effect of death, as does the elegant costume of the toreador whose cummerbund remains too perfectly in place.<sup>94</sup> (At some point between the end of the Salon and his

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<sup>92</sup> “La peinture historique semble de jour en jour devenir plus rare à nos expositions; de même que les tragédies se retirent de nos théâtres. Ce sont des formes de l'art qui captivent moins le public.” Augustin-Joseph Du Pays, “Salon de 1857” in *L'Illustration, journal universel* 29 (15 August 1857): 107.

<sup>93</sup> “C'est un autre maître espagnol, le Greco, qu'il a pastiché avec une égale furie, sans doute en manière de sarcasme contre les amoureux tansis de la peinture discrète et propre.” Thoré, *Salons de W. Bürger*, 99.

<sup>94</sup> It brings to mind the costume piece, *Mademoiselle V...in the Costume of an Espada*, at the Salon one year earlier.

exhibition at the Martinet Gallery, Manet cut up the painting eliminating the *mise-en-scène* of the arena and the background details, focusing now exclusively on the fallen figure. Yet the toreador's costume still retains its connection with the world of spectator sport.<sup>95</sup>)

Gérôme is not often cited in discussions of Degas's art. Perhaps, the connection is perceived as a threat to Degas's modernism.<sup>96</sup> Certainly it is clear why this academic painter most famous for his paintings of ancient themes would not figure in discussions of *The Steeplechase*, a painting that has come to represent the artist's major turn to the painting of modern life. But the subtlety and self-conscious complexity with which Degas's *Steeplechase* combines genre and history—positioned ambiguously between sport and battle and neither quite one nor the other—betrays its allegiance with those academic artists who sought to keep the grand tradition alive however they could. (Even Gérôme's harshest critics were moved to *feel* before his painting: "In front of his *Caesar* the spectator

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<sup>95</sup> Albeit much more complexly. It is no longer, as Linda Nochlin argues, set "firmly and irrevocably in the context of contemporary experience." Nochlin, *Realism*, 65.

<sup>96</sup> Ackerman, who is among the few to point out the connection between the two artists, writes to this point: "The friendship of Gérôme with Degas has either been neglected as unimportant by Degas's biographers, or covered up." Ackerman then directs us to the following: "Various anecdotes about this little known friendship are gathered and retold by R.H. Ives Gammel." (Ackerman, "Gérôme and Manet," 167, 175.) In the text which Ackerman cites, Gammel writes: "Until well into middle life Degas enjoyed the conversation of 'academic' painters whose professional accomplishments are nowadays ignored or held up as objects of ridicule. In the eighteen-sixties, when Degas frequented the *Café Guerbois* and, later the *Nouvelle Athènes* and discussed art with painters of the 'advance-guard,' he was also taking his meals regularly at the *Café de la Rochefoucauld* with such men as Gérôme, Cormon, and Humbert. His relations with Gérôme remained extremely cordial throughout the lifetime of the older man. He was wont to dine with Meissonier and Puvis de Chavannes at various houses." R.H. Ives Gammel, *The Shop-Talk of Edgar Degas* (Boston, MA: University Press 1961), 9.



experiences a feeling of unease.”<sup>97</sup>) If Gérôme’s strategy was no longer a tenable option by the 1860s—like the paradigm of history painting, historical genre itself seems to have also lost its efficacy, at least Manet suggests—then Degas’s *Steeplechase* in turn reveals a certain ambivalence regarding the terms of Manet’s response to this loss.

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<sup>97</sup> The critic was referring specifically to the painting’s unusual cropping. “La timidité de M. Gérôme l’a perdu: en ne montrant qu’une partie des choses, en coupant maladroitement les colonnes dont on n’aperçoit que la base, il a disloqué sa composition, il a fait non un tableau, mais la moitié ou le quart d’un tableau, et c’est pour cela sans doute que, devant son César, le spectateur éprouve un sentiment de malaise dont il ne sait trop comment se rendre raison.” Paul Mantz, “Salon de 1859: Deuxieme article,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 2, no. 4 (15 May 1859): 199-200.

## Chapter Two

### Muybridge, Meissonier and Monet: Naturalism and tradition in the 1880s and beyond

#### 2.1 “The necessity of reformation”: Rethinking *The Steeplechase* in the 1880s

Around the same time that Degas took his brush to *The Steeplechase* once more in the early 1880s, the famed American photographer Eadweard Muybridge arrived in Paris with his striking black-and-white photographs of the horse in motion (**fig. 16**). His unprecedented stop-action stills of animal locomotion captured at last what the human eye could not. In his groundbreaking publication *The Attitudes of Animals in Motion* (1881) the photographer disclosed for the first time the hitherto unseeable phases of the horse's gait. Contrary to what was long thought, because long seen that way, when all four of the horse's legs were off the ground during one phase of its gallop its legs were tucked under its torso, not splayed.

Degas's young friend, Paul Valéry was the first to acknowledge the importance of the artist's interest in Muybridge's photographs, and he spelled out the terms of their importance, more broadly, for the history of art: “Muybridge's photographs laid bare all the mistakes that sculptors and painters had made in their renderings of the various postures of the horse.”<sup>98</sup> Muybridge himself identified

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<sup>98</sup> “Les clichés de Muybridge rendaient manifestes les erreurs que tous les sculpteurs et les peintres avaient commises quand ils avaient représenté les diverses allures du cheval.” Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 82. Translated in Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, ed. David Paul (New York: Princeton University Press, 1960), 41.

some of these mistakes, contrasting earlier representations, “evidences of its absurdity,” with his own, more accurate “moving pictures,” enabled by his invention of the zoopraxiscope, a device that projected these moving pictures on screen. In a course that he designed intended to persuade “the Artist of the necessity of reformation,” Muybridge exhibited slides of sculptures, paintings and prints, all showing the erroneous depiction of the horse through “pre-historic, ancient, medieval and modern times.”<sup>99</sup> In this comprehensive syllabus, he cited examples from Assyrian reliefs, the Parthenon frieze, the Bayeux tapestry and medieval manuscripts, including various monuments of rulers on horseback, as well as paintings and prints by Vernet, Géricault, Delacroix and Meissonier. Muybridge’s work was carried out in close reciprocity with that of Émile Duhamel, an equestrian expert and lieutenant of the French cavalry, who also corrected both ancient and modern artists with his realistic representations of the horse’s gait. In his book, *Le Cheval* of 1874, he juxtaposed his own drawings with numerous examples of the inaccurate representations of the past. Between 1882 and 1883, the *Gazette des Beaux Arts* published his drawings.

The response of artists to these works on equestrian movement by animal physiologists and cavalymen was positive. While at first unwilling to acknowledge the truth of Muybridge’s stills, having already devoted the best years of his life to the painstaking observation of equestrian movement, Meissonier

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<sup>99</sup> Muybridge, *Descriptive Zoopraxography, or The Science of Animal Locomotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1893), appendix A., 2.

relented and in November 1881 he welcomed the photographer with a lavish reception in his Paris residence, an event that was well chronicled in the popular press and widely discussed in artistic and scientific circles.<sup>100</sup> At Muybridge's reception, the invited guests, among them the most distinguished artists of the day, had the opportunity to witness the results of Muybridge's cameras. *Le Figaro*, reporting this momentous event declared: "It is an artistic revolution."<sup>101</sup>

Meissonier duly incorporated these lessons into his works, even correcting at this time his original rendering of a horse in a reproductive sketch of his epic *1807, Friedland* (1861-75).<sup>102</sup> (Meissonier also looked to the graphic notations of Étienne-Jules Marey, another renowned photographer of movement whose photographs *La Nature* published in 1882.) Duhousset, who was friendly with Meissonier, Horace Vernet and Gérôme, noted the enthusiasm with which artists received his studies explaining that his book *Le Cheval*, was produced at the express wish of these artists, even as a kind of consolation for the insufficiency of raw vision. "My eye gets lost," a defeated Vernet apparently told Duhousset.<sup>103</sup>

In the preface to the book, Duhousset quotes a letter from Gérôme who describes

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<sup>100</sup> Françoise Forster-Hahn, "Marey, Muybridge, and Meissonier: The Study of Movement in Science and Art" in *Eadweard Muybridge: The Stanford Years, 1872-1882* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1972), 85-6.

<sup>101</sup> "C'est une révolution artistique et qui a fort amusé les spectateurs invités par Meissonier." *Le Figaro* (27 November 1881). Quoted in Aaron Scharf, "Painting, Photography, and the Image of Movement," *The Burlington Magazine* 104.710 (May 1962): 189.

<sup>102</sup> See Gotlieb, *From Genre to Decoration*, 318.

<sup>103</sup> "J'ai fait mon métier, me dit Vernet en roulant sa cigarette, mais je me suis bien gardé de faire rentrer d'un pas tranquille tous ces animaux que je venais de lancer à fond de train pour le satisfaire; il aurait peut-être saisi l'hésitation que j'éprouve devant la simplicité d'une allure calme, mon oeil s'y perd; je crois cependant, ajouta-t-il, avoir amélioré la reproduction depuis mon père." Duhousset, *Le Cheval: Études sur les allures, l'extérieur et les proportions du cheval* (Paris: Chasles, 1874), 11-12. Duhousset's book was reprinted in Paris in 1881.

*Le Cheval* as “a veritable service to artists.”<sup>104</sup>

Marey’s notations, Duhoussset’s drawings and Muybridge’s stills (of which the popular science magazine *La Nature* published more in 1881), all of which had been of such fascination for artists, must have been on Degas’s mind when he revisited *The Steeplechase* in the early 1880s. We know that Degas, like his contemporaries for whom the depiction of movement had a particular hold, followed Muybridge’s work closely. In a notebook entry of 1879, Degas cites *La Nature*, when it first published Muybridge’s photographs.<sup>105</sup> (A year earlier Degas cited the 15 October issue of *La Nature* in which Marey had written his theories of movement.<sup>106</sup>) Almost a decade later, Degas was still following the photographer’s work, to the point of creating a number of works directly after Muybridge’s plates from *Animal Locomotion* (1887), such as his drawings “Annie G. in Canter” (**figs. 17, 18**) and the sculpture “Hauling, light gray mare ‘Johnson.’”<sup>107</sup> Gary Tinterow also identifies at least two more frames taken from Muybridge’s “Annie G. in Canter” in Degas’s painting, *At the Races: Before the Start* (1885-1892) (**figs. 19, 20**).<sup>108</sup>

Certainly, the astounding evidence and implications of Muybridge’s

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<sup>104</sup> “Après avoir beaucoup voyagé, beaucoup vu et beaucoup observé, je crois que vous rendrez un véritable service aux artistes, si vous voulez bien réunir, dans une publication écrite pour eux, le résumé des connaissances spéciales que vous possédez sur les allures, les habitudes et l’extérieur du cheval.” Ibid., 6.

<sup>105</sup> Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 272.

<sup>106</sup> Degas’s note reads as follows: “*Journal: La Nature*/Victor Masson (année 1878).” Masson was the name of the journal’s publisher. Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 81.

<sup>107</sup> Van Deren Coke, *The Painter and the Photograph* (New Mexico: New Mexico University Press, 1964), 15; Braun, *Picturing Time*, 272.

<sup>108</sup> Boggs, *Degas*, 509.

photographs required a careful working through. In the watercolor sketch that Degas likely made before modifying *The Steeplechase* in the early 1880s, the inclusion of an ambiguous figure standing before the draft painting in the space of the studio, mirroring Degas's own relative position, is telling: it suggests the work of self-reflection that adjustments to the painting, in light of the photographic evidence, demanded. For while we know that the artist had a spontaneous aversion to photography and *trompe l'oeil*,<sup>109</sup> the record presented by *instantaneous* photography posed not only the problem of correcting the faulty stance of depicted horses, but also proposed an entirely new set of pictorial effects with which to grapple. Degas's awareness of some of these complexities reveals itself in the character of his response to Muybridge's innovations, one that was subtler, and perhaps less wholehearted or straightforward, than that of his peers.

Where battle painters like Édouard Detaille, Meissonier and Aimé Morot (all of whom owned *Animal Locomotion*) seized on the more dramatic and novel positions captured in Muybridge's photographs to enhance their paintings with numerous charging horses with all four feet off the ground, Degas instead looked to more restrained moments of the horse's movement. ("Nothing in art should resemble an accident, even movement," Degas once said.<sup>110</sup>) The majority of his paintings, drawings and pastels from the early 1880s onward show horses moving

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<sup>109</sup> "Ne laisser peindre les choses que vues dans une glace pour habituer à la haine du trompe l'oeil." Quoted in Jean Sutherland Boggs, "Degas' Notebooks in the B.N.—III—Group C—1863-86," *Burlington Magazine* 100, part 2 (July 1958): 245.

<sup>110</sup> "Aucun art n'est aussi peu spontané que le mien.... Rien en art ne doit ressembler à un accident, même le mouvement." Paul-André Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, vol.1 (Paris: P. Brame and C.M. de Hauke, 1946), 104.

at a slow gait or a gentle trot. Often they are shown from the rear, a viewpoint that further diminishes the suggestion of vibrant movement. It was in this spirit that Degas “change[d] the movement” (as Cassatt tells us) of the riderless horse in *The Steeplechase*. A close analysis of the painting’s *pentimenti*, alongside Degas’s preparatory drawings for the original painting, establish that the work was originally much more dramatic (fig. 21).<sup>111</sup> In the early stages of the composition, a horse with raised hind legs and streaming tail bounded downward, cutting a diagonal across the center of the picture. That strong definition of the raised hind legs was precisely what the caricaturist Cham parodied in his cartoon of the painting in *Le Charivari* (fig. 22). The horse that we see today runs horizontally—more like the horses that Muybridge positioned laterally in front of his multiple cameras. Rather than charging downwards, it stretches out along the horizontal line of the canvas, emphasizing the width and expanse of the pictorial field, slowing down the faster tempo of the original. Further, the addition of a second riderless horse in the foreground between the original horse and fallen figure works, as if simultaneously the same horse at different stages of its gait as recorded by Muybridge, as a kind of ballast, adding weight and creating drag on the forward movement. Filling the pictorial space that once separated the two, Degas attenuates the abrupt transition in perspective that had generated the effect of

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<sup>111</sup> Drawing on the same visual evidence, Boggs draws the opposing conclusion: “Infrared photographs of the painting reveals the process by which Degas increased the action and the excitement of the painting. This is largely the result of his having painted out the earliest (and higher) horse, which is now hidden behind sky and trees, and having introduced these two horses that have been racing against each other, and both of which have succeeded in throwing their riders.” Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, 123.

unimpeded downhill speed.

The nature of Degas's interest in Muybridge's photographs suggests the artist's appreciation of some of the new challenges that photography presented in these early years of the 1880s, one that involved a critical reassessment of its status in regard to the visible world. While artists like Meissonier recognized the veristic potential of the photographic medium, others saw just the opposite—the subversion of photography's traditional status as an art of *trompe l'oeil*. For with the case of instantaneous photography the camera could “see” more than the eye could; as such, the camera was now considered by some to be a distortion of optical truth. In his 1878 work, *L'esthétique* that was published just as Muybridge's photographs first appeared in France, the well-respected French scientist, Eugène Véron, criticized instantaneous photography on the grounds that it was ocularly untrue, since the eye never sees a moment in which the moving object is immobilized. “Real” vision involves seeing movement as a fluid, blurred movement as one image displaces the next. “Photography doesn't give movement precisely because it only seizes fixed attitudes,” Véron concluded.<sup>112</sup> In 1882, Georges Guérault leveled the same attack and specifically against Muybridge, writing in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* at the same time that his photographs were published again in France:

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<sup>112</sup> “La photographie ne donne pas le mouvement, précisément parce qu'elle ne saisit que des attitudes arrêtées. C'est une des raisons pour lesquelles elle ne peut remplacer l'art, et c'est pour cela aussi que les dessinateurs de l'école de David et d'Ingres—et presque tous nos peintres contemporaines—qui substituent la réalité photographique à la réalité picturale, sont des dessinateurs incomplets.” Véron, *L'Esthétique* (Paris: Reinwald, 1878), 303.



Muybridge's photographs are false, since they give us a sharp image at the moment when, on account of the speed and the persistence of the impressions on our retina, we only see a confused image whose form participates in the preceding and following positions at the same time. In the way the human eye is constituted, it is certain that it has never seen and will never see the horse galloping as it is shown in these drawings.<sup>113</sup>

These comments are but representative voices of the most common objection to Muybridge's photographs. Deliberately *not* utilizing those images of the horse at maximum speed—those images which his peers embraced in an effort to enhance the pictorial verism of their art—suggests Degas's interest in an alternative potential of Muybridge's photography to be put to the service of a new and fundamentally anti-naturalist art.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> “Oculairement parlant, si l’on peut s’exprimer ainsi, les photographies de Muybridge sont fausses, car elles nous donnent une image nette, au moment où, par suite de la vitesse et de la persistance des impressions de notre rétine, nous n’en pourrions voir qu’une image confuse, dont la forme participe à la fois de la position précédente et de la position suivante. Dans les conditions où l’œil humain est constitué, il est certain qu’il ne voit et qu’il ne verra jamais le cheval au galop comme on le lui montre dans ces dessins.” Guérault, “Formes, couleurs et mouvements,” *Gazette des beaux-arts* 2, no. 25 (February 1882): 179. Something of the same was said when the American painter, Thomas Eakins, incorporated at this time Muybridge's studies of horses in his *May Morning in the Park* (1881). A critic noted the disparity between the falsehood of artistic convention and the truth of photographic vision, the former offering the greater accuracy of the two. “If you photograph an object in motion, all feeling of motion is lost, and the object at once stands still. A most curious example of this occurred to the painter just after the first appearance in America of Mr. Muybridge's photographs of horses in action. The painter wished to show a drag coming along the road at a rapid trot...[The horses'] legs had been studied and painted in the most marvelous manner. He then put on the drag. He drew every spoke in the wheels, and the whole affair looked as if it had been instantaneously petrified or arrested...He then blurred the spokes, giving the drag the appearance of motion. The result was that it seemed to be on the point of running right over the horses, which were standing still.” Joseph Pennell, *British Journal of Photography* 28 (1891): 677. Quoted in Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 122.

<sup>114</sup> It is a common assumption in the scholarship that Degas looked to Muybridge's photographs to improve upon the reality of his art—in the same way that his peers' arguably did. Boggs, for instance, quotes Degas's assessment of *Before the Races* (1882), a painting he would rework in 1887—“most of the legs of the horses...are rather badly placed”—and then concludes about the

Degas's reception of Muybridge's photographs, then, marked his difference from his contemporaries' exploitation of the potential drama in certain stages of equine movement. It also reinforced and sharpened the terms of his dissimilarity from the Impressionists. In 1882 the refusal of the Impressionist group to exhibit the work of Jean-François Raffaëlli, an artist whom Degas forcefully championed, served as an indication that the central concerns of Impressionist art lay in the direct observation of the *plein air* world. (The prominence of landscape painting at the exhibition that year underscored the point.) Amongst those works whose sketch-like technique facilitated the analysis of atmospheric change Raffaëlli's conventional draftsmanship would have seemed to have no place. As primarily an art to do with the momentary and mutable world—the terms upon which Impressionist art was increasingly criticized at this time<sup>115</sup>—Degas must have felt definitively now that his art had no place there either. He withdrew his membership from the Impressionist group exhibition that year.

## 2.2 Rerouting the narrative course of the naturalist horse

Given Muybridge, Marey and Duhousset's achievements in the analysis of

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later version of the painting: it “was his curiosity about photography” that “would help with the eventual resolution of the problem” (Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, 126). But a closer look at this later version of the painting (**fig. 20**) alongside two frames from Muybridge's “Annie G in Canter” (**fig. 19**) betrays the awkward nature of Degas's borrowing. Doll-like, stiff and flat, Degas's drawings of these Muybridge stills likewise attest to the artist's stylized manner of adapting his paintings to the photographic evidence (**figs. 17, 18**).

<sup>115</sup> Émile Zola, who once had high hopes for Impressionism, now wrote: “Tous ces artistes-là sont trop facilement satisfaits. Ils dédaignent à tort la solidité des oeuvres longuement méditées; c'est pourquoi on peut craindre qu'ils ne fassent qu'indiquer le chemin au grand artiste de l'avenir que le monde attend.” Zola, *Écrits sur l'art (1865-1896)* (Paris: Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine: Paris, 1991), 400.

equine movement, Degas might have thought back to *The Steeplechase*'s first, critical voices when he stood back before the painting in the space of his studio, reassessing the work of his youth. "Like the jockey, this painter is not yet entirely familiar with his horse."<sup>116</sup> Or, of the Cham cartoon which cruelly parodied the riderless horse as a stiff jointed marionette, with the caption: "M. De Gas. You cannot go there on horses of wood!"<sup>117</sup> In 1897 in conversation with François Thiébault-Sisson—now as "a grey-bearded man shrouded in a bulky Iverness cape"<sup>118</sup> (as the journalist described him)—Degas unearthed the memory of that moment in his early career, emphasizing the extent to which he had not yet known his subject:

Even though I was quite familiar with 'the noblest conquest ever made by man,' even though I had had the opportunity to mount a horse quite often, even though I could distinguish a thoroughbred from a half-bred without too much difficulty, even though I had a fairly good understanding of the animal's anatomy and myology, having studied one of those plaster models found in all the casters' shops, I was completely ignorant of the mechanism of its movements, and I knew infinitely less than any noncommissioned officer, who, because of his years of meticulous practice, could imagine from a distance the way a certain horse would jump and respond.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Boggs, *Degas*, 123.

<sup>117</sup> "Fallait pas qu'il y aille...aux chevaux de bois!" Cham [Amédée de Noé], *Le Salon de 1866: Photographié par Cham* (Paris: Arnauld de Vresse, 1866), n.p.

<sup>118</sup> "Un homme à barbe grise enveloppé dans un épais macfarlane..." Thiébault-Sisson, "Degas sculpteur raconté par lui-même" [1921] in Maurice Guillard, *Degas, Le modelé et l'espace* (Paris: Centre culturel du Marais, 1984), 177. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 160.

<sup>119</sup> "Or, si je connaissais alors assez bien 'la plus noble conquête que l'homme ait jamais faite,' s'il m'arrivait assez fréquemment de l'enfourcher, si je distinguais sans trop de peine un pur-sang d'avec un demi-sang, si même je possédais assez bien, pour l'avoir étudiée sur un de ces écorchés en plâtre qu'on découvre dans toutes les boutiques de mouleur, l'anatomie et la myologie de

Photographers, Degas went on to explain, “had not yet invented the device which made it possible to decompose the movements—imperceptible to the human eye—of a bird in flight, of a galloping horse or trotting horse.”<sup>120</sup>

Yet, Degas’s confession of his “earlier incompetence” (Boggs’s wording) was not necessarily a point of shame, as it has been understood.<sup>121</sup> For it was during these years, when Degas reminisced to Thiébault-Sisson, that he painted *The Fallen Jockey*, his last great statement in paint. (He would not paint again on this scale.) And a crucial part of that great statement is that, unlike Meissonier who amended his earlier representation of the horse in deference to the authority of the photograph, Degas moves in precisely the opposite direction: he sticks with the very feature that Muybridge had long since proven to be mere pictorial fiction, and even hyperbolizes it. The striking error of *The Steeplechase*’s riderless horse is that all four of its legs are now splayed even more resolutely outward.

Like Bucephalus, the unruly horse of antiquity who refused to be tamed, the horse of Degas’s *Fallen Jockey* runs counter both to the principles of Muybridge’s photography and Meissonier’s *photographisme* (as critics pejoratively called it).

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l’animal, j’ignorais du tout au tout le mécanisme de ses mouvements, et j’en savais infiniment moins sur l’article que le sous-officier rengagé auquel une longue et attentive pratique permet de voir en imagination à distance, quand il parle d’une bête, ses détentes et ses réactions.” Thiébault-Sisson, *Degas, Le Modelé et l’espace*, 179. Translated in Boggs, *Degas*, 123.

<sup>120</sup> “Marey n’avait pas encore inventé le dispositif grâce auquel on peut décomposer les mouvement imperceptibles pour notre oeil, de l’oiseau qui vole, du cheval qui galope ou qui trotte.” Thiébault-Sisson, *Degas, Le Modelé et l’espace*, 179. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 161.

<sup>121</sup> “Years later, Degas admitted his earlier incompetence to the journalist Thiébault-Sisson.” Boggs, *Degas*, 123.

He runs, more broadly, counter to the historical course of French horse painting, and to the discourse about it, reaching back to Carle Vernet. Viewed alongside Degas's other works of the 1890s—such as his phantasmal photographs or unfettered sculptures or blurred monotypes of half-remembered landscapes—*The Fallen Jockey* takes part in a collective project, as I will go on to argue, of rethinking the terms of ambitious painting, circling back now on the issues that *The Steeplechase* had originally foregrounded, namely, the naturalist reform of *grande peinture* of which the horse had so often been at the center. Degas's "flying gallop" is a synecdoche of this rethinking.

Throughout the nineteenth century, critics perceived the increasingly naturalistic depiction of the horse as one of *the* ways in which painters reworked the terms of serious painting; as discussed earlier, the realistic representation of the horse was bound up with an intricate set of issues related to the reform of history painting by way of its affiliation with genre and its naturalist imperative.<sup>122</sup> At mid-century, when the future of French painting seemed uncertain, even headed toward decline, the horse became a useful pictorial construct for both artists and critics who tried to trace a more encouraging trajectory of French painting, one that linked the contemporary French school with an artistic tradition of past greatness. Ernest Chesneau, for instance, argues that by virtue of their

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<sup>122</sup> I am deeply indebted to Marc Gotlieb's analysis of the representation of the horse in nineteenth-century French painting and how its artists, particularly Meissonier, negotiated the influence of the past masters by means of its naturalistic representation. See Gotlieb, *The Plight of Emulation: Ernest Meissonier and French Salon Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Also see Gotlieb, "From Genre to Decoration," in particular Chapter Three, "De Phidias à Meissonier, the System of Genre," 228-313.

lifelike appearance Gros and Géricault's horses equaled those of antiquity. "The ancients seem to have had the privilege of representing accurately and poetically the horse." Then, after surveying the whole history of equestrian art, Chesneau concludes: "In reality, the horse shows itself again for the first time in the great battles of Gros." "Gros painted the steed," he elaborates. "Géricault was the first to paint the horse."<sup>123</sup> Given that imitative skill was among the essential criteria that established their ties with the art historical canon, it is no surprise that Géricault's biographer, Charles Clément, emphasizes this aspect of the artist's education:

He learns in great detail. He neglects nothing, not its anatomy, its inner form, not the play of light on its robe, not its movements so difficult to capture and express. He has neither preference for race nor color. He copies all....He seeks the truth.<sup>124</sup>

These kinds of remarks indicate the foundation upon which the French narrative of equestrian painting was erected, one wherein each generation linked itself to their predecessors' achievements by claiming to surpass them. In reference to Carle Vernet and the Italian artists of the Renaissance, Charles Blanc wrote:

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<sup>123</sup> "L'antiquité semble avoir eu le privilège de la représentation exacte et poétique du cheval...mais en réalité, le cheval ne se montre de nouveau pour la première fois que dans les grandes batailles de Gros....Gros a peint le coursier; Géricault, le premier, a peint le cheval." Chesneau, *Les Chefs d'école*, 169.

<sup>124</sup> "Il l'apprend dans ses moindres détails. Il ne néglige rien, ni son anatomie, et sa forme intérieure, ni les jeux de la lumière sur sa robe, ni ses mouvements si difficiles à saisir et à exprimer. Il n'a de préférence pour aucune race et pour aucune couleur. Il copie tout....Il cherche le vrai." Clément, *Géricault: Etude biographique et critique avec le catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre du maître* (Paris: Didier et cie., 1879), 41.

Arriving in Italy, Carle Vernet began to contemplate, as all the world does, the frescoes of Raphael, the paintings of Giulio Romano and of Salvator; but it was mainly to see how these masters had painted horses. He who as a painter loved them and studied them closely and knew them as a rider, could not be seduced by these epic forms...of whose error had been to remove from nature all that gave them the appearance of heroism.<sup>125</sup>

In this same vein, Gustave Planche writes that Géricault's lifelike rendering of the horse was the means by which he also challenged his predecessors, in this instance the towering figure of David. Planche's important essay on Géricault of 1851 helped set the evolutionary terms of the French narrative:

When Géricault made his debut he was twenty-two years old: he sent to the Salon of 1812 *An Officer of the Imperial Guard* which was greeted with admiration by his comrades and with astonishment from faithful followers of the school of David....the manner by which its author conceived the attitude of the rider and the horse's movement did not belong to any tradition. It is nature caught in the act. Géricault represented ingeniously and frankly what he had seen without worrying whether the lines that reality presented to him accorded or not with the established rules of the school of David.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> "Arrivé en Italie, Carle Vernet se mit à contempler comme tout le monde les fresques de Raphaël, les tableaux de Jules Romain ou de Salvator; mais ce fut principalement pour voir comment ces maîtres avaient peint les chevaux. Lui qui en avait fait une étude spéciale, qui les aimait en peintre et les connaissait en écuyer, il ne put être séduit par ces formes épiques, d'une ampleur convenue, dont le tort était d'enlever à la nature tout ce qu'elles donnaient à des apparences d'héroïsme." Blanc, *Histoire des peintres français au dix-neuvième siècle*, 292.

<sup>126</sup> "Lorsque Géricault fit son début, il avait vingt-deux ans: il envoya au salon de 1812 un *Chasseur de garde impériale*, qui fut accueilli avec admiration par ses camarades, avec étonnement avec les disciples fidèles de l'école de David....la manière dont l'auteur a conçu l'attitude du cavalier et le mouvement du cheval ne relèvent d'aucune tradition. C'est la nature même prise sur le fait. Géricault a représenté naïvement, franchement ce qu'il avait vu, sans s'inquiéter de savoir si les lignes que la réalité lui fournissent s'accordaient ou ne s'accordaient

Planche's narrative constitutes but one chapter of an art historical narrative wherein each successive generation outdid its predecessors in this manner. Earlier, for instance, critics saw Vernet's battle paintings, at the center of which was his life-like depiction of a horse, as an advance upon the historical paintings of those French artists before him. In his 1864 biography of the Vernets, Amédée Durande emphasizes the superior "vérité" of Carle's battle paintings:

The principal innovation of Carle Vernet consists of the way in which he treats paintings of battle in an epoch where Gros composed his magnificent epics. He copied neither the spirited frays nor body-to body combat of Bourguignon d'Aniello Falcone or of Salvator Rosa, nor the royal portraits of Van der Meulen that primarily serve as immense, strategic maps. He abandoned convention in order to seek only the truth and he has begun a reform that his son was in charge of completing better yet.<sup>127</sup>

In keeping with the progressive logic of this narrative, Horace Vernet surpassed his father with an even more naturalistic representation of the horse. Durande continues:

The manner by which Carle Vernet has understood and interpreted the forms of a horse is very clearly like his predecessors. He renounced the noble steed (this pretentious phrase alone gives a fair idea of the animal

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pas avec les règles établies dans l'école de David." Planche, "Géricault" (1851) in *Portraits d'artistes, peintres, et sculpteurs* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1853), 325.

<sup>127</sup> "La principale innovation de Carle Vernet consiste dans la manière dont il traita les tableaux de batailles, à une époque où Gros composait ses magnifiques épopées. Il ne voulut copier ni les mêlées fougueuses et corps à corps du Bourguignon, d'Aniello Falcone ou de Salvator Rosa, ni ces portraits royaux de Van der Meulen qui servent de premiers plans à d'immenses cartes stratégiques. Il abandonna la convention pour ne chercher que la vérité, et il a bien commencé une réforme que son fils s'est chargé de terminer mieux encore." Durande, *Joseph, Carle et Horace Vernet*, 324.



which served certain type of painters) and he left in the stable those horses of the Flemish and Dutch masters. He devoted his brush to the study of the race that the skillful horseman would prefer and he became a sworn portraitist of thoroughbreds....In his study of the horse, he would only be surpassed by the most illustrious of his pupils, Géricault; but it is in his merit that the true path was opened, even if it meant bequeathing a legacy for his successors to further.<sup>128</sup>

In the same spirit Gérôme described Meissonier's achievement, affirming that his depiction of the horse now surpassed even that of their immediate predecessors whose understanding of equine anatomy still fell short:

In order to find representations of the horse in exact length and movement one must look to our age. Since the time he lived, man was not able to accurately represent a horse. What has now made this possible? From the Roman artists, and later to those of the Renaissance, and from those of the time of Louis XIV and Louis XV, there was little interest in the animal in general....The horse became a formula, such as the curly lion of Louis XV. Géricault, Carle Vernet and Horace Vernet began to study it more seriously, but they had no idea of paces, and the heads of their horses were always too small.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> "La manière dont Carle Vernet a compris et interprété les formes du cheval tranche très-nettement aussi sur celle de ses prédécesseurs. Il a renoncé au *noble coursier* (cette expression prétentieuse peut seule donner une juste idée de l'animal qui a servi de type à certains peintres), et il a laissé à l'écurie les gros chevaux des maîtres hollandais ou flamands. Il consacra ses pinceaux à l'étude de la race qu'en habile écuyer il préférerait, et il se fit le portraitiste juré des pur sang....Dans l'étude du cheval, il devait être surpassé par le plus illustre de ses élèves, par Géricault; mais c'est déjà un mérite que d'ouvrir la vraie voie, quitte à léguer à ses successeurs le soin de l'élargir." Ibid., 325.

<sup>129</sup> "Pour retrouver des représentations du cheval dans d'exactes conditions de longueur et de mouvement il faut arriver à nos jours. Depuis l'époque où il vivait, on n'a pas su faire un cheval. A quoi cela tient-il? A ce que les artistes romains, plus tard ceux de la Renaissance, ceux des temps de Louis XIV, Louis XV, s'intéressaient très peu aux animaux en général....Le cheval était devenu une formule, comme le lion frisé Louis XV. Géricault, Carle Vernet et Horace Vernet ont

It was up to artists of his own generation, Gérôme concluded, to improve upon these errors. “It has not been until our day that we have finally taken a compass and measured all things, and we have arrived at good results because serious artists have occupied themselves with it seriously.”<sup>130</sup> Meissonier’s efforts were a prime example of the results of this kind of serious research: “The horse has only been portrayed at walking pace in the past thirty years; previously it was always trotting, that is to say, both limbs diagonally opposed.”<sup>131</sup>

Degas himself shared Gérôme’s respect for Meissonier’s achievement. “A giant among dwarfs” was how Degas referred to him at around the time he returned to painting horses with renewed intensity, during the decade of the 1890s.<sup>132</sup> (Implicit in a narrative of successive improvement, after all, is the acknowledgement that one’s predecessors are *worthy* of surpassing. “Full of enthusiastic admiration for the paintings of Gros,” Blanc tells us, Géricault “devoted entire hours to their contemplation...and he spoke of his work with a tone of enthusiasm seeming to despair of ever reaching such a height.”<sup>133</sup>) When

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commencé à l’étudier plus sérieusement, mais ils n’avaient aucune idée des allures, et la tête de leur chevaux était toujours trop petite.” Frédéric Masson, “J-L. Gérôme: Notes et fragments inédites,” *Les Arts* 26 (February 1904), 28, 30.

<sup>130</sup> “Ce n’est que de nos jours qu’on a enfin pris un compas et mesuré toutes choses et qu’on est arrivé à de bons résultats, parce que des artistes sérieux s’en sont occupés sérieusement.” Ibid., 30.

<sup>131</sup> “Il n’y a pas plus de trente ans qu’on met un cheval au pas, auparavant c’était toujours le trot, c’est-à-dire les deux jambes opposées en diagonale.” Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> “Le Géant des nains.” Valéry, *Degas*, 69.

<sup>133</sup> “Plein d’une admiration exaltée pour les tableaux de Gros, il passait des heures entières à les contempler...Il ne prononçait ou n’entendait prononcer le nom Gros qu’avec respect, et il parlait de ses oeuvres sur le ton de l’enthousiasme, paraissant désespérer d’atteindre jamais à une pareille hauteur.” Blanc, *Histoire des peintres français au dix-neuvième siècle*, 416.

Degas reminisced to Thiébault-Sisson he spoke ruefully of the artist who had died just a few years earlier: “[I] wanted to work at least as well as Meissonier...one of the men most informed about the horse whom I’ve ever known.”<sup>134</sup> And Valéry tells us of the time Degas kept him in front of one of Meissonier’s bronze sculptures of Napoleon’s horse at the Durand-Ruel gallery, poeticizing about the beauty of each of its parts.<sup>135</sup> Having studied Meissonier’s equestrian imagery with the same kind of intensity with which, say, Géricault once studied Gros’s, Degas was well equipped to speak of its merits. Looking at Degas’s notebooks from 1864 to 1872 we find at least three instances where he sketches directly from Meissonier’s *Battle of Solferino*. Here, he not only copies the postures of Meissonier’s horses, but also the fine, descriptive surfaces of the artist’s handling that tells of the texture of the horse’s coat and the muscles beneath. In Degas’s late equestrian paintings we continue to feel Meissonier’s influence, both directly and indirectly. In *At the Races: Before the Start* (1885-1892) (**fig. 23**), Degas models one of his jockeys after one of the mounted officers from *Solferino*. In its small scale and horizontality, such late equestrian paintings, of riders on horseback silhouetted against a low horizon, recall the small-scale and horizontal charge of Meissonier’s scenes of battle.

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<sup>134</sup> “J’ai voulu faire au moins aussi bien que Meissonier...un des hommes les plus renseignés sur le cheval que j’ai jamais connu!” Thiébault-Sisson, *Degas, Le Modelé et l’espace*, 179.

<sup>135</sup> “Un jour, chez Durand-Ruel, il me tint fort longtemps devant statuette de Meissonier, un Napoléon équestre en bronze, haut d’une coudée, et il me détailla les beautés, ou plutôt les exactitudes qu’il reconnaissait à cette petite oeuvre. Canons, paturons, boulets, assiette, arrière-train...Il fallut écouter toute une analyse critique et finalement élogieuse.” Valéry, *Degas*, 89.

At around the time that Degas spoke to Thiébault-Sisson, Degas was working on *The Fallen Jockey*. As his last great statement in paint, there is little doubt he had posterity in mind.<sup>136</sup> The equestrian subject lent itself to such concerns, as the criticism of it, enmeshed with issues of canonicity, attests. Yet, if the pursuit of pictorial fidelity was the means by which Meissonier, like those before him, advanced the French narrative of ambitious painting (thereby securing their place in it), for Degas the conditions of modernity seemed to require a new pictorial strategy, a reversal of its terms—at least this is what I believe *The Fallen Jockey* suggests. When speaking with Thiébault-Sisson of his admiration for Meissonier, Degas went on to say the following:

I wanted to do at least as well as Meissonier but...the older I became the more clearly I realized that to achieve exactitude so perfect in the representation of animals that a feeling of life is conveyed, one had to go into three dimensions...The most beautiful and the best-wrought drawing is always less than the precise, the absolute truth and thus leaves the way open to all that is fraudulent. You know the much-vaunted and, in fact, very worthy drawing in which [Eugène] Fromentin captures the stride of a galloping Arabian steed; compare it with reality and you will be struck far less by what it expresses than by all that it lacks...with a little skill, you should be able to create an illusion for a short time. But however painstakingly you study your adaptation you will achieve nothing more

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<sup>136</sup> Degas, on the whole, gave up oil painting on canvas after this date. See Richard Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1996), 60.

than an insubstantial silhouette, lacking all notion of mass and of volume and devoid of precision.<sup>137</sup>

Meissonier's naturalism, in other words, led its adherents down a dead-end path, never, in fact, capable of being *natural enough*, forever constrained by the ineluctable, two-dimensionality of the support. As "an insubstantial silhouette, lacking all notion of mass and of volume," the horse of Degas's *Fallen Jockey* signposts the foundational error of Meissonier's naturalism. More broadly still, Degas's unrealistic treatment of the horse halts the forward momentum of the doomed art historical narrative—perhaps Degas felt that Meissonier had already achieved the best of pictorial realism leaving him nowhere to go—thereby strategically reversing the terms of the generational competition, and clearing a path for a new kind of ambitious painting suited to the conditions of the present.

### 2.3 The "flying gallop"

So he asked, 'What is the use of this horse of wood, and what is its virtue and what the secret of its movement?' and the Persian answered, 'O my lord, the virtue of this horse is that if one mount him, it will carry him

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<sup>137</sup> "J'ai voulu faire au moins aussi bien que Meissonier, mais...plus j'ai vieilli, plus je me suis rendu compte que pour arriver, dans l'interprétation de l'animal, à une exactitude si parfaite qu'elle donne la sensation de la vie, il faut recourir aux trois dimensions...Le plus beau dessin, et le plus étudié, reste toujours en deçà de la vraie, de l'absolue vérité, et par là même, il laisse place au chiqué. Vous connaissez le dessin très vanté, et très méritoire d'ailleurs, où Fromentin a fixé l'allure d'un étalon arabe au galop; comparez-le avec la réalité, et vous serez frappé beaucoup moins de ce qu'il exprime que de tout ce qui lui manque...avec un peu d'adresse, faire illusion un instant, mais vous n'aboutirez, quelque scrupule que vous ayez apporté à votre traduction, qu'à une silhouette sans épaisseur, sans effet de masse, sans volumes, et qui manquera de justesse." Thiébault-Sisson, *Degas, Le Modelé et l'espace*, 179. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 161.

whither he will and fare with its rider through the air and cover the space of a year in a single day.'

-- "The Ebony Horse," *One Thousand and One Nights*<sup>138</sup>

If antinaturalism served Degas's effort to advance the narrative course of ambitious painting, Meissonier's naturalism had earlier been in the service of the same aim, yet differently so. Meissonier's commitment to working from the live model, Gotlieb explains, was a strategic defense mechanism by which he eased the debilitating anxiety in the face of the towering greatness of the past masters.<sup>139</sup>

The artist himself described his strategy (one that Sigmund Freud would come to term "avoidance"): "The master is the one whose works do not make us think of any others."<sup>140</sup> In reference to *Solferino* (1863) Théophile Gautier writes of the efficacy with which Meissonier's naturalism erased the memory of his

predecessors' art:

He has brought scrupulous fidelity to his rendering of tranquil subjects, the ordinary themes of his talent. Before he paints he consults neither with Salvator Rosa, nor Bourguignon nor Gros nor Carle nor Horace Vernet nor Yvon or Pils. It is directly inspired from reality and he has given an image so accurate that it is an illusion...If we were witness to the very same scene we would learn no more.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> *The Arabian Nights*, trans., Richard Burton (Digireads.com Publishing, 2008), 243.

<sup>139</sup> Gotlieb, "From Genre to Decoration," 280

<sup>140</sup> "Le maître est celui dont les oeuvres ne font pas penser à celles des autres." Meissonier, *Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier. Ses souvenirs. Ses entretiens précédés d'une étude sur sa vie et son oeuvre*, ed., Octave Gréard (Paris: Hachette, 1897), 135.

<sup>141</sup> "Avec la scrupuleuse fidélité qu'il apportait à rendre les tranquilles sujets, thèmes ordinaires

Assessing Meissonier's art just after his death in 1891, the Symbolist critic Gustave Geffroy reiterated something of Gautier's observation: "In [his] art, influences, imitations, traditions, theories do not have to be invoked."<sup>142</sup> Much of Degas's late art seems born of a different, even opposing strategy: in its repudiation of Meissonier's empiricism—and Muybridge's, too, who also aimed to obviate all earlier images of the horse on the grounds of their inaccuracy—*The Fallen Jockey* invokes those equestrian images produced before the invention of the mechanical eye, by Gros, Vernet and Géricault.

Indeed, Degas's rearward look to tradition became a near obsessive one during the decade of the 1890s, when the artist's reverence for the art of the past guided so many of his activities. Steeped in old age reverie, we are told how Degas would often recount an apocryphal tale in which Titian passed down to Van Dyck the secret of his technique.<sup>143</sup> Daniel Halévy tells of long evenings spent by candlelight listening to the stories of *The Arabian Nights*. We know that Degas travelled to Madrid to view first-hand the canonical arts of Spain, like the afternoon spectacle of the bullfight ("so that the sun will not wither them"<sup>144</sup>) and

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de son talent. Il n'a consulté avant de peindre ni Salvator Rosa, ne le Bourguignon, ni Gros, ni Carle, ni Horace Vernet, ni Yvon ne Pils. Il s'est inspiré directement de la réalité, et il en a donné une image tellement exacte qu'elle fait illusion. On assisterait à la scène même qu'on n'apprendrait pas davantage." Gautier, "L'Art contemporain: Meissonier, peintre d'histoire," 73.

<sup>142</sup> "...en art, les influences, les imitations, les traditions, les théories n'ont pas à être invoquées." Geffroy, "Meissonier," *L'Artiste* 123 (January 1891): 104.

<sup>143</sup> Etienne Moreau-Nélaton, "Deux heures avec Degas," *L'Amour de l'art* 12.1 (July 1931), 277.

<sup>144</sup> "La course de taureaux, à laquelle nous nous préparons, n'aura lieu qu'à 4 h. ½. Eux-mêmes, attendent que le soleil ne les foudroie pas." Degas was writing to Bartholomé from Madrid. Degas, *Lettres de Degas*, 138-9.

the life-size portraits of Velázquez (“nothing, no nothing can give the right idea of Velázquez.”)<sup>145</sup> And he avidly collected the art he admired most, covering the walls of his apartment with it. (“If one wants to travel alone one must visit areas full of life or else full of works of art,” he wrote in his youth, presaging the motive behind his plans for a personal museum in these mature years.<sup>146</sup>) He spoke frequently of his most recent acquisitions of the great rivals Ingres and Delacroix, both of whose works he hung in his bedroom above his bed.<sup>147</sup> Whenever (and to whomever he could) Degas would recount his youthful visits to Ingres’ studio. Over the course of the decade he bought almost one hundred of Ingres’s works on paper.<sup>148</sup> When Vollard asked him in these years how a young artist should train, Degas instructed simply: “He should copy the masters and recopy them.”<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, he directed Ernest Rouart to the Louvre to copy Mantegna. He sent Daniel Halévy to the Turners and Corots.

Unusually for an artist well past his apprenticeship years, Degas himself now frequently copied the works of the Old Masters, reprising his youthful practice as he described it to Gustave Moreau in his early twenties: “I have made a

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<sup>145</sup> “Rien, non rien ne peut donner l'idée de Vélasquez.” Ibid., 139.

<sup>146</sup> “Pour voyager seul il faut traverser des pays où il y ait de la vie ou bien plein d’objets d’art.” Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 70. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 23.

<sup>147</sup> Moreau-Nélaton, “Deux heures avec Degas,” 269.

<sup>148</sup> Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, 67.

<sup>149</sup> “Il faut copier et recopier les maîtres, et ce n’est qu’après avoir donné toutes les prévues d’un bon copiste qu’il pourra raisonnablement vous être permis de faire des radis d’après nature.” Ambroise Vollard, *Degas (1834-1917)* (Paris: Georges Crès & Cie, 1924), 64.



virtual copy of Veronese's angel...and I have started Giorgione's landscape."<sup>150</sup>

In 1897 Degas copied Delacroix's *Fanatics of Tangier* (1838) (as he advised Rouart to do) and Mantegna's *Minerva chasing the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* (1502) with its fantastic, flying cupids with butterfly wings. In the same year, he copied Poussin's *Rape of the Sabines* (1637-8) and one of Ingres's studies from the 1860s for his mural, *The Golden Age*.<sup>151</sup>

Scholars generally regard the intensified historicism of these years as indicative of the artist's nostalgic longing, as Reff writes, "toward the art of the past...as he grew more disillusioned and conservative generally."<sup>152</sup> More forcefully, but to the same point, Kendall argues that Degas's practice of copying the Old Masters is "the artistic equivalent of his notorious militarism and rabid nationalism in later decades, as well as a distrust of fashions and social innovation of all kinds."<sup>153</sup> However, the nature of Degas's historicism as it manifested itself in these late years might indicate more than nostalgic reverence or retrogressive traditionalism. The iconic motif of the "flying gallop"—an image not seen in life, but itself a motif *copied* from one painter to another—suggests the terms of a larger project at stake, one that I think constituted nothing less than a quixotic effort to collapse the temporal distance separating himself from the achievements

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<sup>150</sup> "J'ai fait presque une copie de l'ange de Véronèse dans son ébauche et j'ai commencé le paysage du Giorgion..." Reff, "More Unpublished Letters of Degas," 281.

<sup>151</sup> Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, 116.

<sup>152</sup> Reff, *Degas: The Artist's Mind*, 294.

<sup>153</sup> Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, 64.

of the past. “We are *tradition*,” Daniel Halévy records him saying at this time.<sup>154</sup>

In 1900, moved by Meissonier’s photographic revelations, the French archaeologist Salomon Reinach would elaborate the argument of Degas’s own pithy insistence. Developing the scholarship of the erroneous representation of equine movement, Reinach illustrated how artistic motifs often originate not in perception but in other motifs—and he chose the very image of the flying gallop as point of persuasion, as an artistic tradition spanning over more than one thousand years.<sup>155</sup> Through a series of images, Reinach traced the geographical path of the motif, from Mycenea to Asia Minor, to the Trans-Caucasus, to Northern Persia, and, via Southern Siberia, to the Chinese Empire, and then to Japan where it arrived to Europe in 1794 in the form of an engraving by George Stubbs of a horse called “Baronet.” Widely adopted in English art, the motif soon made its appearance in France, most famously in Géricault’s *The Races at Epsom*, of 1821, where we see four racing horses in flying position. Degas’s *Sulking* (1869-71) (**fig. 24**) suggests his awareness of the cross-Channel transmission of the motif. In the background of this painting, behind the couple in the foreground, hangs a copy of a lithograph of the English engraving *Steeplechase Cracks* (1847) by John Herring, which shows horses with all four of its legs dramatically splayed.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Daniel Halévy, *Degas parle* (Paris: La Palatine, 1960), 40.

<sup>155</sup> Salomon Reinach, *La Représentation du galop dans l’art ancien et moderne* (Paris: A. Picard, 1925). Reinach’s essay originally appeared in multiple installments in *Revue archéologique* from 1900-1901.

<sup>156</sup> As with Degas’s other paintings within paintings, Reff thinks that the inclusion of Herring’s

Reinach's thesis that the motif of the flying gallop had traversed the ages, passed down from one generation to the next, would not have surprised advanced artists and critics of the nineteenth century who had long since recognized the complex dialectic between innovation and tradition in the Western tradition.<sup>157</sup> Even Géricault's biographer, Clément, who stresses the artist's utmost fidelity to the live model— "He studies the smallest of details..."—nevertheless, in the end, concedes: "This does not mean that in the early studies of the young naturalist painter, he had not often unconsciously interpreted the art of his predecessors."<sup>158</sup> (Indeed, Géricault's depiction of the flying gallop motif was likely drawn from Gros's.<sup>159</sup>) Manet made explicit Clément's gentle concession of influence in his paintings of the 1860s, bluntly foregrounding "the repetition structure of post-

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print serves as "a compositional and expressive device." I think the reference also relates to Degas's broader project of negotiating the terms of his relationship with tradition. Reff, "The Pictures within Degas's Pictures," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 1 (1968): 147.

<sup>157</sup> See Michael Fried's discussion of Baudelaire's denial of that dialectic: "Painting Memories: On the Containment of the Past in Baudelaire and Manet," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (March 1984): 510-42. As for the subject of tradition and originality see Fried's seminal treatment of the issue in *Manet's Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, where he identifies "the repetition structure of post-Renaissance European painting" as one of the determining features of Manet's art. Fried's study builds on his earlier work, "Manet's Sources: Aspects of His Art, 1859-65," *Artforum* 7 (March 1969): 28-82. See also those later studies by Thomas Crow (on David), Norman Bryson (on David, Ingres and Delacroix), Stephen Bann (on Delaroche) and Marc Gotlieb (on Meissonier), all of whom argue in various ways that their artist's awareness of the "history of the repetition of forms" (Bann, 99) manifests itself as a strategy "to overcome the weight and authority" of the past (Bryson, 6). Bryson, *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Bann, *Paul Delaroche: History Painted* (Reaktion Books: London and Princeton University Press, 1997); Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Gotlieb, *The Plight of Emulation*, 1996.

<sup>158</sup> "Ce qui n'empêche pas que dans ses premières études du jeune peintre naturaliste, il y ait très souvent une interprétation inconsciente peut-être..." Clément, *Géricault*, 41.

<sup>159</sup> See Irma Jaffe's persuasive comparison of the charging horse of Géricault's *Marmeluke* (1816) with the charging horse of Napoleon's officer in Gros's *Bonaparte in Italy* (1796). "The Flying Gallop: East and West," *The Art Bulletin* 65.2 (June 1983): 198-99.

Renaissance European painting,”<sup>160</sup> as Michael Fried describes it: “Namely, that in one way or another, or in a variety of mutually reinforcing ways, they [paintings] are made from previous paintings, which in turn are made from still previous ones, and so on ad infinitum.”<sup>161</sup> The iconic motif of the flying gallop literalizes this truth, perhaps even more forcefully than the motif of Degas’s “fallen figure” which itself has its own pictorial lineage extending back to Manet’s fallen toreador to Gérôme’s fallen emperor and to the fallen soldier in the Pourtalès collection. Even Degas’s process itself, his intense and long-running method of working—painting and repainting and over the course of so many decades—effectively foregrounds the impacted nature of this historical layering, as a multi-temporal journey through time, resulting in a dense, quasi-archeological site. *The Fallen Jockey* marks itself as being but one layer of a rich, historical palimpsest.

In 1892, returning with his boyhood friend, Henri Valpinçon, to the Château Ménil-Hubert, Degas made three paintings of the billiard room of the Normandy chateau (**fig. 25**). A painting of the vast collection of paintings covering the walls of the billiard room, they too seem to suggest the fact that paintings are made from paintings, the grounds for Degas’s second challenge to Meissonier’s naturalist practice, that is, as an ahistoricist fiction of sorts.

## 2.4 A Series of Landscape Monotypes

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<sup>160</sup> Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, 248.

<sup>161</sup> Fried, “Painting Memories,” 518.

Working from templates of imagery, not the live model, together with the technical procedures of copying, tracing and reversing, inflects the dreamlike hazy monotypes Degas produced in the early years of the 1890s—a process which involves transferring an engraved image from a metal plate to paper, creating a new, reversed impression of the first image. The mirror-like reversal of the fallen jockey’s bent leg—in *The Steeplechase*, his left leg is bent; in *The Fallen Jockey*, the right—suggests this kind of technical operation. Not working from the live model, Degas seems to say, but from an earlier image and one that itself drew on an earlier one, *and so on and so forth*. Conceptually, these monotypes also seem related to Degas’s rejection of Muybridge and Meissonier’s ahistoricist empiricism—in this instance, via the figure of Monet whose art, at least for Degas, represented the immediate and quasi-photographic transcription of sensory data. “More Monet than my eyes can stand,” Degas quipped of his old rival.<sup>162</sup> “Let me get out of here! Those reflections in the water hurt my eyes!” was his response to Monet’s series of water lily paintings when he saw them at the artist’s monographic show at the Durand-Ruel gallery in 1892.<sup>163</sup>

Just a few months after attending Monet’s exhibition, Degas held his own show at the Durand-Ruel gallery where he also exhibited a series of landscapes (**figs. 26, 27**). In a letter to Ludovic Halévy he explained that an autumn trip

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<sup>162</sup> “Plus Monet que mes yeux ne peuvent supporter.” Degas, *Lettres de Degas*, 278. Translated in Richard Kendall, “Degas and the Contingency of Vision,” *The Burlington Magazine* 130.1020 (March 1988): 192.

<sup>163</sup> “Je m’en vais, tous ces reflets d’eau me font mal aux yeux.” Vollard, *Degas*, 41. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 200.

through the Burgundy countryside inspired them.

They are the fruit of my travels this summer. I would sit at the door of the coach and as the train went along I could see things vaguely. That gave me the idea of doing some landscapes. There are twenty-one.<sup>164</sup>

Abstract and loosely executed, these monotypes of mountains obscured by mist, smudged with colored oils and overlaid with scumbled pastel and blotted ink, speak to a quintessentially impressionist idiom, but with a critical difference: unlike Monet, who painted his water lilies before their real-life image in a pond of his own creation, Degas etched his monotypes indoors, drawing on memory instead. “Imaginary landscapes” was how he described them in a letter to his sister.<sup>165</sup> In one fantastic monotype a suggestively phallic tree juts out from the wedge between two cliffs. In another, the contours of a female form—the thighs, belly, breasts, neck and chin—phantasmagorically emerge from the mountainous slopes of the countryside (*Steep Coast*, 1890-2).<sup>166</sup> No, not working from the live model, Degas seems to say, but from some place within—and *within* the long Western tradition, stretching back from Courbet to Titian, where landscapes

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<sup>164</sup> “Je me tenais à la portière des wagons, et je regardais vaguement. Ça m'a donné l'idée de faire des paysages.” Degas, *Lettres des Degas*, 278. Translated in Kendall, “Degas and the Contingency of Vision,” 180.

<sup>165</sup> In a letter written on December 4, 1892, Degas refers to his exhibition of “paysages imaginaires.” Jeanne Fevre, *Mon oncle Degas* (Paris: Pierre Cailler, 1949), 102.

<sup>166</sup> Carol Armstrong writes: “Whatever else the landscape monotypes might be, as an exhibited series, they must have been meant at least in part, to be seen in ironic relationship to Monet’s series.” She argues that the monotypes work to show “impressionist sensationalism as a world of utter formlessness and absolute introversion.” (Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, 208). She does not account for the anthropomorphic figuration of some of these monotypes. Monet himself seems to have taken note of such, as Dario Gamboni persuasively argues. See Monet’s own series of the Normandy coast that he painted between 1896 and 1897 where figurative definition mingles with non-objective form. Gamboni, *Potential Images: Ambiguity and Indeterminacy in Modern Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 109.

echoed the curves of naked women and nymphs.

The medium of monotype itself seems related to Degas's effort to remake Monet's naturalism, subverting and inverting its emphasis on the immediacy of the present, and rerouting form back to the grounds of history. While monotype had always been an important part of Degas's practice, in these monotypes of the 1890s Degas now increased the number of images that he drew from a single plate, more fully exploiting the multiplication of images that the medium enabled.<sup>167</sup> Degas's obsession with tracing at this time—"Make a drawing, begin it again, trace it; begin it again, and re-trace it"<sup>168</sup>—aims at a similar reiterative intention. Such practices not only undermine suggestions of spontaneous creation, of the immediate and one-off, but also draw attention to the repetition structures of Degas's art, that, for instance, almost all of the motifs of his late drawings and pastels originate in a common source in a single tracing.

Relatedly, in these monotypes Degas also more fully exploits the layering possibilities of the medium. Unlike his earlier black-and-white monotypes, like the ones that he made for Ludovic Halévy's collection of short stories, *La famille Cardinal* (1883), Degas now uses a range of oil pigments, applying various colors to the metal plate, at times wiping them off and applying new ones. The result affords colors a sense of depth: beneath each layer of semitransparent color lies

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<sup>167</sup> Scholarship offers four explanations for Degas's serialism: market demand (Kendall), technical experimentation (Reff, Rouart, et al.), blindness (Boggs), and a "passion for perfection" (Vollard, *Degas, An Intimate Portrait*, 63).

<sup>168</sup> As Degas advised both Jacques-Emile Blanche and Paul Lafond. Kendall, *Beyond Impressionism*, 81.

the suggestion of an earlier application of color. Through the gradual accumulation of repeated applications of pigment, Degas, so to speak, slows down his first impression of the landscape as he had seen it from the moving train (as he earlier slowed down the movement of his *Steeplechase* horse, though differently so). Frozen in a series of striated layers of color these landscapes hardly suggest an instant in time, but one drawn out through a prolonged and multi-temporal process.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Residues and imprints of previous layers: these are the means by which Degas's monotypes thematize the continual presentness of the past, a past that underlies and dynamically shapes the form of the present. Similarly thematizing the complex network of associations between past and present, earlier marks and later ones, when Degas revisits *The Steeplechase* in these years of the 1890s, reworking it once more, he is careful to not entirely obscure its earlier layers. Brown, shadow-like passages, for instance, retain the memory of the original position of the horse and jockey's legs. Changing the position of the horse's tail, Degas scrapes out the original, but does not completely obscure it; he pulls the blue sky above it, but intentionally does not obliterate it.

In the following chapter we will continue to explore the terms of Degas's pictorial historiography as it takes form in the antinaturalism of his late art. The layering and repetition structures that *The Steeplechase* and *Fallen Jockey*



foreground lay the foundation for our understanding of Degas's investment in perpetuating the French tradition of ambitious painting, one that, as his art suggests, requires a close-up engagement with the art of the past, not merely nostalgic longing from afar.

Degas's active engagement with the art of his contemporaries is made more explicit in the next chapter, though it should already be evident by now. That his first monographic show required him to paint in a quasi-abstract idiom and of a subject essentially not his own suggests the extent of Degas's need to come to terms with the serious art of his era. Degas's antinaturalism, insofar as it repudiates suggestions of speed and spontaneity—the terms within which pictorial naturalism had come to be associated in his era—develops *through* an assimilation of his peers' practice. For instance, rejecting Meissonier's equestrian imagery as *not natural enough* Degas finds in the very principles of Meissonier's art the grounds on which to oppose it. Similarly, in using the medium of monotype, Degas turns the mechanical operations of Muybridge's photography—of copying, tracing and reversing—against itself, producing an art not based on a live model, but one drawn from an earlier image and one that itself drew on an earlier image, and so on and so forth. Degas's insistence—“No art was ever less spontaneous than mine. What I do is the result of reflection and of the study of the great masters”<sup>169</sup>—tracks the series of operations at play. First establishing his

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<sup>169</sup> “Aucun art n'est aussi peu spontané que le mien. Ce que je fais est le résultant de la réflexion et de l'étude des grands maîtres; de l'inspiration, la spontanéité, le tempérament, je ne sais

difference from his contemporaries', Degas then reroutes us back in time, to an art produced before the invention of the mechanical eye: frozen in mid-stride, the horse of *The Fallen Jockey* resurrects the famous stop-action moment of *grande peinture*.

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rien...Rien en art ne doit ressembler à un accident, même le mouvement." Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 104.

## Chapter Three

### Anti-Naturalism, Symbolism, and the retheorization of *grande peinture* at the *fin-de-siècle*

#### 3.1 The classical revival: “To find again the movement of the Greeks”

For Degas, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the naturalism of Muybridge, Meissonier and even Monet, which was grounded in the immediacy of an empirical present, came to serve as a useful foil to his own work when he was immersed in a kind of old-age style of retrospection grappling with the past and hoping to attach himself to something of its *gravitas*. Degas was not alone in coupling a consideration of tradition with an anti-naturalist bias; of course, both of these aspects characterize much of *fin-de-siècle* French art and criticism. Artists of the avant-garde, seeking to reorient the direction of French art, such as the Symbolists, including Moreau and Odilon Redon, and the Nabis Maurice Denis, Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard, reacted strongly against a pictorial realism premised upon materialist, positivist science and effectively guaranteed by it. German idealist philosophy, mysticism, and neo-platonism guided their vision and practice.<sup>170</sup>

The core aim of Symbolism—“the elaboration of [the] essential, pure, and

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<sup>170</sup> See Nicholas Watkins, “The Genesis of a Decorative Aesthetic” in Gloria L. Groom, et al., *Beyond the Easel: Decorative Paintings by Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, and Roussel, 1890-1930* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2001), 1-28.

sublime idea,”<sup>171</sup> as Valéry put it—reached back to the dualism of Idea as against the phenomenal world in classical Platonism. Ultimate value lay in the reification of an abstract idea, not the imitation of the visible world. In seizing on this classical ideal, the Symbolists gave new life to some of the old values of the Academy. The Symbolist aspiration, for instance, to reveal the essence of form recalls Charles Blanc’s account of the artist’s mission in the opening pages of his *Grammaire*: it is “to reveal to us the primitive beauty of things, to discover their imperishable character, their pure essence.”<sup>172</sup> As director of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, Blanc reinstituted the traditional academic pedagogical program of copying casts of antique sculptures, as a training method for extricating “that beauty which contains the immortal idea, which reveals the divine.”<sup>173</sup> Ernest Chesneau, another voice of the Academy, maintained that the abstract ideal was best manifested in *grande peinture*.<sup>174</sup>

While Degas often spoke of his respect for the art of the past, he also positioned himself at one remove from his artistic peers. Of the Symbolists he said with a characteristic acerbic bite: “I can’t stand all this poetry, this sophistry, and these young men in long-tailed morning coats holding lilies in their hands

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<sup>171</sup> “...l’édification toujours plus précise de cette idée essentielle, pure et sublime.” Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 58. Translated in Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, 28.

<sup>172</sup> “L’artiste est chargé de rappeler parmi nous l’idéal, c’est-à-dire de nous révéler la beauté primitive des choses, d’en découvrir le caractère impérissable, la pure essence.” Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin* [1867], 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris: Jules Renouard, 1870), 14.

<sup>173</sup> “Il en dégage l’or pur de la beauté primitive; il y retrouve l’idéal.” Ibid., 10.

<sup>174</sup> Watkins, *Beyond the Easel*, 4.

while they talk to women.”<sup>175</sup> Nevertheless, certain of the Symbolists’ values aligned with Degas’s own, which goes some way toward explaining why the Symbolists themselves saw him as a kindred spirit. “He was far too intelligent and cultivated to consent to being merely an indiscriminant observer,” Paul Valéry wrote in his important study, *Degas danse dessin*, wherein he draws out the congeniality of Degas’s art with that of the Symbolists: “Degas turned upon the study of reality all the scrupulousness that makes for ‘classicism.’”<sup>176</sup>

The Nabi painter, Maurice Denis, who met with Degas regularly during the artist’s late years, memorialized one of his studio visits with a portrait, *Degas and his Model* (1906), which conveys their shared interest in the complex character of an anti-naturalist art still bent towards classicism, as Valéry understood it. On the one hand, Denis’s portrait characterizes the aged artist as the paradigmatic academic painter, his source of inspiration being the human form, the model in his studio. (With his monotypes of suggestively figurative hills, Degas defined himself against Monet along these lines, literalizing the ambition of the contemporary classicist painter: to disinter the old art of figure painting that lay buried during a three-decade interregnum in which it was overtaken by landscape painting in the contemporary Salons.) On the other hand, however, in Denis’s portrait, Degas directs his gaze *away* from his model. Suggestive of an apparition,

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<sup>175</sup> As recorded by Daniel Halévy in a diary entry of February 20, 1897. “Je ne peux pas supporter ça, moi, cette poésie, ce sophisticage, et ces jeunes gens en longues redingotes qui parlent aux femmes un lys à la main.” Halévy, *Degas parle*, 109. Translated in Kendall, *Degas by Himself*, 241

<sup>176</sup> Valéry, *Degas*, 55.

some conjuring of the artist's mind, the model's features are vague and formless: the veil of her hat hides her face and her uninflected black dress constrains her figure. Denis's portrait tells of an art inclined in two directions, toward the corporeal and the cerebral—or, to use the then-revived nomenclature of classicism, the real as well as the ideal.

That Degas's art was deeply engaged in recalibrating the relations between realism and classicism was evident early on. Even when Degas gave up history painting, leaving behind its allusions to and quotations of antiquity, the issue of the artist's "classicism" still figured centrally in discussions of his Impressionist art. Whether or not critics thought the term relevant, some notion of "classicism" was nevertheless used as a benchmark by which they defined his achievement. While Philippe Burty, for instance, recognized something "classic" in his depictions of laundresses—"Will not M. Degas, in this hour, be a classic?"<sup>177</sup> he asks, and answers in the affirmative, Armand Silvestre conversely wrote of Degas's acrobatic dancer Miss Lala in archly, ironic archaic terms, as "hardly Menalchus or Tityrus."

Those naïve shepherds knew nothing of the Fernando Circus and miss Lala. NON OMNIA POSSUMUS OMNES. Lycoris and Galatea seem to me to be ample consolation for their ignorance. Miss Lala is in no way

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<sup>177</sup> "M. Degas ne serait-il, à son heure, une classique? On ne saurait traduire d'un crayon plus sûr le sentiment des élégances modernes...S'il peignait Nausicaa, au lieu de ses nerveuses et pâles blanchisseuses de fin, on lui reconnaîtrait un grand sens de l'harmonie." Burty, "Exposition de la société anonyme des artistes," *La République française* (25 April 1874).

reminiscent of those virgins espied through the willows.<sup>178</sup>

Reviewing the Sixth Impressionist exhibition, Charles Ephrussi similarly described the artist's wax statuette *The Little Fourteen-Year Old Dancer* (1881) in terms of the failure to be classical, which, of course, brings the classical into play:

She is shown half-undressed, standing in her working clothes, tired and worn out, stretching her exhausted limbs, pulling her arms behind her back... That, certainly, is not the Terpsichore of classical lines—it is, rather, the Opera *rat* in her modern expression, learning her métier, with all her low nature and her stock of base instincts and vicious inclinations.<sup>179</sup>

While Silvestre and Ephrussi used classical allusions to frame the apparent failure of Degas's dancers of the Impressionist era, there was critical analysis that continued to turn on the subject of “classicism” into the 1890s and in ways that participated in the formulation of a new understanding and vocabulary of classicism. Recognizing “a force that is general and immutable” in the “play of muscles” of Degas's late dancers, André Mellerio deemed Degas “the artist who

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<sup>178</sup> “Ce n'est point Ménalque ou Tityre qu'il faut prendre ici pour guide. Il a manqué à ces bergers naïfs de connaître le Cirque Fernando et Miss Lala. NON OMNIA POSSUMUS OMNES. Lycoris et Galatée me semblent des consolations forts suffisantes à leur ignorance. Miss Lala ne rappelle pas non plus ces vierges entrevues à travers les saules.” Silvestre, “Les Indépendants,” *La Vie moderne* (24 April 1879).

<sup>179</sup> “Elle se présente en demi-nature, debout dans son vêtement de travail, lasse et fatiguée, détendant ses membres harassés, étirant les bras sur le dos; la tête fine et sentée, malgré son épouvantable laideur, avec un nez vulgairement retroussé, une bouche saillante et un front caché par des cheveux qui tombent presque sur des petits yeux à demi-fermés. Voyez, sous un maillot de soie à plis menus, la courbure nerveuse des jambes, les solides attaches des pieds enfermés dans les souliers usés, le torse osseux et souple comme l'acier. Ce n'est point là, certes, la Terpsichore aux lignes classiques, c'est le *rat* d'Opéra dans son expression moderne, apprenant son métier, avec toute sa nature et son stock de mauvais instincts et de penchants vicieux.” Ephrussi, “Exposition des artistes indépendants,” *Chronique des arts et de la curiosité*, (2 April 1881).

will represent the classic, in the highest meaning of the word, at the *fin de siècle*.”<sup>180</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe articulated a similar view of Degas’s late pastels:

There are pastels of *danseuses* that leave us with an impression similar to fragments of enormous friezes. We can imagine the Parthenon decorated in this way. His dancers cease to be mere *balletteuses*, just as the ancient warriors in the Parthenon frieze have surrendered their objectivity and have become the servitors of divinity.<sup>181</sup>

Meier-Graefe here speaks directly to Degas’s own intention as he frequently expressed it in these years, particularly when asked of his predilection for depicting dance. When his patron Louisine Havemeyer inquired, “Why, monsieur, do you always do ballet dancers?” Degas replied: “To find again the movement of the Greeks.”<sup>182</sup>

The intensification of Degas’s classicism along with the stated ambition that motivated it locates his late practice within the wider cultural current of the *fin de siècle*. It was at this time, as Daniel Halévy reports, that Degas often spoke with the Symbolist poet and critic Stéphane Mallarmé, who in a series of prose essays written between 1886 and 1897 established the theoretical basis for an idealist conception of the performative arts of the Symbolist period.<sup>183</sup> In 1888, Mallarmé asked Degas to illustrate one of these essays, “Ballets,” to be included in

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<sup>180</sup> Mellerio, “Degas,” *La Revue artistique* (April 1896): 67.

<sup>181</sup> Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 79-81.

<sup>182</sup> “Parce que là seulement je puis retrouver les mouvements des Grecs.” René Gimpel, *Journal d’un collectionneur, marchand de tableaux* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1963), 186. Translated in Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, 134.

<sup>183</sup> Aside from “Ballets,” the most important of these essays include: “Hommage à Wagner” (1885), “Hamlet,” “Mimique,” “Notes sur le Théâtre” (1886) and “Crayonné au Théâtre” (1887).



a volume entitled *Le Tiroir de Laque*. Although the work was not published, the request indicates for us the depth of their friendship and aesthetic exchange.<sup>184</sup>

(We recall the photograph of 1895-6 when Degas posed Mallarmé in his living room as part of a series in which he recorded his most intimate friends.) In this essay devoted to the subject of dance Mallarmé asserted: “The Ballet... is a symbolic form.” He wrote of the dancer as a symbol akin to the abstract classicist *idée*: “Her corporeal presence is minimized or, ideally, denied for the benefit of pure mental thought.” He elaborates:

I mean that the dancer *is not a woman who dances*, for the juxtaposed reasons that she *is not a woman* but rather a metaphor which symbolizes some elemental aspect of earthly form, sword, cup, flower, etc.<sup>185</sup>

Like Mallarmé, prominent dance historians of the period such as Henri De Soria and Gaston Vuillier similarly treated the aesthetic of dance as an abstract system of signs. While their project was not aimed at theorizing an idealist conception of the arts, theirs constituted a pointed effort to attach modern-day dance to a classical past. Akin to the way in which Salomon Reinach traced the history of pictorial motifs, these dance historians traced the history of kinesthetic

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<sup>184</sup> See *Correspondance Mallarmé - Whistler: Histoire de la grande amitié de leurs dernières années*, ed., Carl Paul Barbier (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1964) 5, 129 and Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, 88. See also Lisa Bixenstine Safford, “Mallarmé’s Influence on Degas’s Aesthetic of Dance in His Late Period,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 21.3 (1993): 419-33.

<sup>185</sup> “...la danseuse *n’est pas une femme qui danse*, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu’elle *n’est pas une femme*, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur, etc., et qu’elle *ne danse pas*, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d’élans, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu’il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction: poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe.” Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Henri Mondon and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1945), 304.

patterns. In their ambitious surveys of the entire history of dance De Soria's *Histoire pittoresque de la danse* (1897) and Vuillier's *La Danse* (1898) argue that all movement originated in a common source and that contemporary dance was thus part of a continuous tradition from the beginnings of human society. In his lavishly illustrated text, Vuillier juxtaposed ancient and modern images in order to "give an exact idea of the movements performed by Greek dancers that we find in most of our modern dances."<sup>186</sup> Swiftly collapsing millennia, Vuillier maintained:

The dancer of our day dancer performs this movement today as two thousand years ago. Similarly, in this statue of the fourth century representing a Bacchante wrapped in a soft, lightweight fabric that spins freely on itself, we find the movement...of a living dancer.<sup>187</sup>

To the same end, *La Danse grecque antique d'après les monuments figures* (1896) by the well-known musicologist and composer, Maurice Emmanuel, revived Greek dance by instructing contemporary dancers to imitate the movements depicted on archaic Greek vases. (Emmanuel based this publication on his doctoral thesis of 1895, *De Saltationis Disciplina apud Graecos*, in which he studied the designs of antique vases at the Louvre as well as those recently discovered in Greece to deduce ancient forms of dance.) As if to underscore the meeting of past and present, for the publication of *Danse grecque antique*

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<sup>186</sup> "...donnent une idée très exacte des mouvements exécutés par les danseurs grecs et que nous retrouvons dans la plupart de nos danses modernes." Vuillier, *La Danse* (Paris: Hachette, 1898), 37.

<sup>187</sup> "Le danseur de nos jours exécute ce mouvement comme il y a deux mille ans. De même, dans telle statuette du iv<sup>e</sup> siècle représentant une bacchante enveloppée dans une étoffe souple et légère, qui tournoie gracieusement sur elle-même, nous retrouvons les mouvements...d'une danseuse vivante." Ibid., 78.

Emmanuel commissioned Marey to photograph contemporary dancers enacting these ancient movements.

Degas's late imagery of the dance would have been sharpened against the backdrop of these theorizations. In his foray into poetry in the 1890s (itself likely inspired by Mallarmé), Degas explicitly conjoins the temporal aims of Vuillier and de Soria's historiography with the spirit of Mallarméan Symbolism. In one such poem, "Petite Danseuse," for instance, Degas appeals to nymphs and Graces to descend from their "far off height" to lift up a contemporary dancer from the streets of Montmartre.<sup>188</sup> In the previous chapter we saw that the possibility of this kind of quixotic meeting of past and present is suggested in the motif of the flying gallop, a paradigmatic instance of the way in which human culture evolves within an overarching and unified pictorial system or structure.

We are now in a position to see that Degas's late dancers themselves took shape within a similar structuralist model of thought at the *fin-de-siècle* that served to diminish temporal distance. Now Degas would further his earliest ambition of reprising the tradition of *grande peinture* by transposing the renewed aesthetic of classicism, as manifest in his late images of dancers, onto a greatly expanded scale. If the nature of this revival seemed untenable in the 1860s and lay dormant

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<sup>188</sup> "Danse, gamin ailé, sur les gazons de bois./Ton bras maigre, placé dans la ligne suivie/Equilibre, balance et ton vol et ton poids./Je te veux, moi qui sais, une célèbre vie./Nymphs, Grâces, venez des cimes d'autrefois/Taglioni, venez, princesse d'Arcadie,/Ennobler et former, souriant de mon choix./Ce petit être neuf, à la mine hardie./Si Montmartre a donné l'esprit et les aïeux,/Roxelane le nez et la Chine les yeux/A ton tour, Ariel, donne à cette recrue/Tes pas légers de jour, tes pas légers de nuit.../Mais, pour mon gout connu! qu'elle sente son/fruit/Et garde aux palais d'or la race de sa/rue." Cited in Pierre Cabanne, *Edgar Degas* (Paris: Tisne, 1958), 85.

(not dead, as the criticism of the period in spite of itself suggests) in the 1870s, the concomitant and perhaps fortuitous emergence in the 1890s of an art inflected with ideals paralleling Degas's own helped enable it.

### 3.1.2 Classicism and the repudiation of genre

Meier-Graefe's idealizing account of Degas's pastels in which "dancers cease to be mere *balletteuses*," having "surrendered their objectivity," directs us to the relevance of the old antagonism between genre and history. Meier-Graefe understood the essential import of Degas's dancers as having to do with the play between the polarities that underpin these terms, naturalism versus classicism. The revived ideals of the latter (to which Meier-Graefe was himself sympathetic) led artists to reevaluate that earlier moment in the 1860s when genre finally usurped the primacy of *grande peinture*, threatening French culture as the inheritor of the classical tradition. Genre came to stand for everything that the Symbolists stood against, the old criticisms of which were unearthed and reiterated with renewed vigor. Unsurprisingly, for example, Meissonier came under attack. As the paradigmatic painter of the materialist practices of the Salon—of an easily-domesticated art of fashionable scenes rendered with an extremely fine attention to incidental detail—Meissonier represented the degeneration of French art, its *fall* from *grande peinture*.

Meissonier's art, so the Symbolists maintained, did away with art's transcendental reach for things that could not be seen in favor of lowly things

more properly overlooked, such as the minutiae of the everyday. Voicing the familiar criticisms of four decades earlier, the Symbolist critic Gustave Geffroy now wrote:

It is the meticulous application, the puerile reproduction of all details that brought about such a state of ecstasy and provoked such admiring clamors. The manner in which Meissonier painted boots, needles, buttons and braids was made to delight those who prefer the finishing of a picture to its overall harmony and the banal exactitude of the photograph to the artist's personal evocations. The sympathy for such a method was obviously delusional, this spectacle of tiny paintings where the paint descends in degrees of ingenuity and falls from amazing feats.<sup>189</sup>

In his famous article of 1890, "Definition of Neo-Traditionism," which would come to serve as the Symbolist's group manifesto, Denis echoed Geffroy's sentiment:

Oh this distressing vulgarization of art, this facile dilettantism! They [the bourgeois] enjoy using technical terms, they are persuaded in the end of their judgments.<sup>190</sup>

On the occasion of Meissonier's death, in 1891, Jules Antoine, the art critic for the *Revue indépendante*, wrote to the same effect:

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<sup>189</sup> "C'est la méticuleuse application, c'est la puérile reproduction de tous les détails, qui ont amené un tel état d'extase et provoqué des clameurs si admiratives. La façon dont Meissonier peignait de bottes, des aiguillettes, des boutons, des ganses, était déjà faite pour ravir d'aise ceux que le fini d'un tableau satisfait davantage que l'harmonie générale et qui préfère la banale exactitude de la photographie aux évocations individuelles. Mais cette sympathie pour un tel procédé devait évidemment aller jusqu'au délire, au spectacle des toiles minuscules où le peintre descendit les degrés de l'ingéniosité et tomba au tour de force." Geffroy, "Meissonier," 104.

<sup>190</sup> "O cette désolante vulgarisation de l'art, le facile dilettantisme! Ils jouissent d'employer des termes techniques, ils se persuadent, à la fin, qu'ils jugent." Maurice Denis, "Définition du néo-traditionalisme" [1890] in *Du Symbolisme au classicisme: Théories*, ed. Olivier Revault d'Allonnes (Paris: Hermann, 1964), 38.

He never had the ambition to express ideas....When it came to tackling complicated works, he chose banal or vulgar ideas....Meissonier was primarily a genre painter, he has never been simply a painter.<sup>191</sup>

Degas, we know, was thinking seriously about Meissonier at this moment; and I have argued that the fantastical horse of *The Fallen Jockey* counters that artist's ahistoricist empiricism. More subtly and in line with the Symbolist repudiation of Meissonier, *The Fallen Jockey* seems to counter genre itself, that is, the pictorial form that served Meissonier's naturalism in the first place. *The Fallen Jockey* cuts itself loose from genre, insulating itself from genre's particulars of time and place, from the anecdotal and contemporary. In this way, *The Fallen Jockey* differentiates itself from *The Steeplechase*: it is more abstractly conceived than its predecessor. In the first place, the jockey is less jockey-like. Degas attenuates the identifying markers of his profession: his costume is less detailed and less uniform-like and his dark beard obscures his riding cap. In fact, the painting rather specifically resists Geffroy's pejorative description of genre: "The production of genre painting, the abominable anecdotes in costumes."<sup>192</sup> The horse, as well, stripped of the accoutrements of riding, seems less like a horse to be ridden: the brown leather of its saddle blends in with the brown of its body and its girth, which attaches the saddle to its body, is less prominent, less starkly

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<sup>191</sup> "N'eut jamais l'ambition d'exprimer des idées....Quant il a abordé des oeuvres compliquée il a choisi des idées banales ou vulgaires....Meissonier fut surtout un peintre de genre, il n'a jamais été simplement un peintre." Antoine, "J.-L.-E. Meissonier," 228.

<sup>192</sup> "La fabrication de la peinture de genre, de l'abominable historiette à costumes." Geffroy, "Meissonier," 104.

white. The absence, too, of other horses and riders obfuscates the painting's legibility as a racing scene. If *The Steeplechase* was never straightforwardly a genre scene, *The Fallen Jockey* is even less so.

One observes a similar lack of genre's signifying details in Degas's late imagery of dancers, reduced to iconic simplicity, absent of indications of time and place, excised of all details of the real-life actuality of the milieux of practice and performance, of examinations and rehearsals and backstage changes, of dance masters and musical instruments, of admiring men peering amongst the *coulisses*. Théodore Duret compares Degas's late dancers with the earlier ones, such as those that he made in 1874 to accompany Halévy's collection of anecdotal stories of the *coulisses*. Duret makes explicit the antagonism between classicism and genre that seems to motivate *The Fallen Jockey*. Duret describes these earlier images as "young women in a particular costume who appeared with smiles on the stage, and conveyed to the eye, by means of graceful movements and studied poses, an effect of lightness, charm and pleasure."<sup>193</sup> In contrast, the late dancers suggest "the *being* apart from the ballet dancer."<sup>194</sup> Duret concludes: Degas "raised his point of view to something infinitely more powerful," that is, he was no longer "merely a delicate and original painter of *genre*."<sup>195</sup>

An example of the kind of image Duret describes is *Four Dancers* (1899) (**fig. 28**), one of the largest and most ambitious of Degas's late paintings. In it,

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<sup>193</sup> Théodore Duret, "Degas," *The Art Journal* (July 1894), 204.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

four figures enact a series of gestures in a largely indeterminate space. None of the devices by which Degas conventionally indicated a performance on stage are present, such as the grooves of wooden floorboards or the cut-off image of a fan implying an audience in the stage wings of a theatre. The detail of a landscape is visible in the background; yet the edges of the wooden or cardboard stage flat on which it is presumably painted is not.

The lack of genre's signifying details extends to the dancers themselves. "In reality no one has yet painted, as he has, the portrait of the dancer, of the coryphée...of this completely professional beauty whose many faces make up the general beauty of a society," Burty wrote, recognizing one generalized image among the many faces of Degas's dancers.<sup>196</sup> This classicist proclivity towards abstract generalization is pronounced in *The Four Dancers*. Shown in profile or from the rear, minimal physiognomic detail differentiates one dancer from the other. Unlike his earlier depictions, such as *Ballet Rehearsal on Stage* (1874) (**fig. 29**), we cannot make out the individuating expressions, those familiar attitudes of boredom, tiredness and coquettishness found in the literature and imagery of the *coulisses*. Cropped and layered above each other, not scattered across the space of the stage or rehearsal room, the configuration furthermore suggests not four individual dancers but four states of a single dancer. Degas perhaps draws on a mode of seeing accustomed to the sequential photography of Marey or Muybridge

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<sup>196</sup> "Personne, en réalité, n'a encore fait, comme lui, le portrait de la danseuse, de la coryphée....de cette beauté toute professionnelle dont les faces multiples composent la beauté générale d'une société." Burty, *La République française*, n.p.



and puts it to the service of making pictorial something of the classicist notion that Mallarmé articulated in his meditations on the Symbolist aesthetic of dance, describing it less as a performance of individuals than a grand summation or integrated resolution *of gesture itself*.

[Is not] the chief goal of the dance, apart from its mechanics...a mobile, unending, ubiquitous synthesis of the attitudes of each dance group, a synthesis which they must fraction ad infinitum? Hence an equal exchange resulting in the de-individualization of the coryphée of the group, of the dancing entity.<sup>197</sup>

In his analysis of Degas's late dancers, Valéry paraphrases the next of Mallarmé's insights arising from Mallarmé's paradoxical understanding that dance is neither about individual dancers nor about performance *per se*: "A *danseuse* is not a woman dancing because she is not a woman and she does not dance."<sup>198</sup> In the context of our own study we might ask the following: as neither quite woman nor dancer, but the *idea* of dance, does Degas's Mallarméan treatment of this subject—as a "linear pattern" of "the greatest possible generalization" and "invested with a kind of infinity," to use Valéry's words<sup>199</sup>—find something of its

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<sup>197</sup> "...que le premier sujet, hors cadre, de la danse soit une synthèse mobile, en son incessante ubiquité, des attitudes de chaque groupe: comme elle ne la font que détailler, en tant que fractions, à l'infini. Telle, une réciprocité, dont résulte l'*in*-individuel, chez la coryphée et dans l'ensemble, de l'être dansant, jamais qu'emblème, point quelqu'un..." Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, 304. Translated in *What is Dance?: Readings in Theory and Criticism*, eds. Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen (London: Oxford University Press, 1983), 112.

<sup>198</sup> "Mallarmé dit que la danseuse n'est pas une femme qui danse, car ce n'est point une femme, et elle ne danse pas." Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 27. Translated in Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, 17.

<sup>199</sup> Valéry here is specifically referring to the artist's attraction to the nude female form. "Degas, toute sa vie, cherche dans le Nu, observé sous toutes ses faces, dans une quantité incroyable de

counterpart in his late horse and rider, now also neither quite riding horse nor rider? The too-obvious notional simulacra of blue sky and green earth suggest this turn away from fact to concept—to the *idea* of earth and sky. That decision could be aligned with the featureless cape of David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, as opposed to the frayed hem and mud-stained boots and trousers of Delaroche's version.

If the evolution of Degas's dance imagery parallels the nature of the changes from *The Steeplechase* to *The Fallen Jockey*, insofar as both move away from the descriptive and narrative idiom of genre to the reification of the abstract *idée*, the nature of these changes is perhaps directed first and foremost at solving a pictorial “problem,” one that Degas would have recognized as standing in the way of achieving the powerful and singular effect of a new kind of classicism in contemporary ambitious painting. Unlike his quite self-conscious moves in *The Steeplechase*, which seemed to articulate precisely what critics perceived to be the primary deficiency of genre—that is, that it lacked the pictorial unity of the self-sufficient *tableau*—Degas now eliminates genre's particulars of time, place and physiognomic detail. *The Fallen Jockey* seems purposefully aimed at *deflecting* any such criticism.

Degas's revisions of *The Steeplechase* in the 1880s already suggested his investment in rectifying the perceived failings of genre, its emphasis on detail at

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poses, et jusqu'en pleine action, le système unique de lignes qui *formule* tel moment d'un corps avec la plus grande précision, mais aussi la plus grande généralité possible.” Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 87. Translated in Valéry, *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, 49.

the expense of the whole, on the instant at the expense of a larger and more significant totality. Having slowed down the tempo of the original painting with the inclusion of an additional horse Degas worked against the fragmented and spliced “snapshot” aesthetic of genre, countering its aesthetic as most explicitly manifest in Muybridge’s photographs. Later, in his landscape monotypes of the 1890s, Degas as we have seen would synthesize sequential moments by layering one image above the next, as if suspending the immediacy and multiplicity of perceptual effects in an effort to articulate a unified and definitive one. Degas’s intersecting and overlapping dancers of the period seem related to this pursuit of pictorial synthesis (further served by the technical process of overlaying one image on another.) Observing his pictures of ballet dancers arranged in the studio, the model, Pauline, reported:

One of these figures, a dancer at the barre, reappeared in a number of pastels. In one, she was dressed in green and stood out against a background of violet; in another, the background was yellow and the costume red, and in a third she appeared in a pink tutu against a ground of green.<sup>200</sup>

As Burty saw one face among the many faces of Degas’s dancers, Pauline recognized one dancer amongst the multiplicity of dancers—that they shared a common origin in a single tracing. It is valuable in this context to turn to the

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<sup>200</sup> “Ils représentaient soit des danseuses...L’une des figures, une danseuse à la barre, se retrouvait dans plusieurs pastels. Dans l’un, elle était habillée de vert et se détachait sur un fond violet; dans l’autre, le fond était jaune et le costume rouge, et dans un troisième se voyait un tutu rose sur un fond vert.” Alice Michel, “Degas et son model,” *Mercure de France* (16 February 1919): 631. Translated in Kendall, *Beyond Impressionism*, 103.

aesthetic of Symbolist decoration, which afforded Degas with another means of addressing his pursuit of a powerful pictorial synthesis to equal that of the most serious art of the past.

### 3.1.3 The decorative desideratum

Moved by Degas's imagery of the dance, Valéry had more to say:

The Dance generates a whole plastic world...out of the forming, dissolving and re-forming patterns created by the same set of limbs, as out of the movements which echo each other at equal or harmonious intervals, comes *decoration in time*, just as the spatial repetition of motifs, or their symmetry, gives rise to *decoration in space*.<sup>201</sup>

Valéry's ruminations pivot on another critical way in which Degas's late art mediates between the shared values of past and present, seeking to align itself with the lost art of *grande peinture* by means of the most modernist form of pictorial anti-naturalism: that is, "decoration in space," which is, arguably, genre's antithesis.<sup>202</sup> Georges Aurier, one of the Symbolists' most vocal theorists, defined the "decorative" as follows:

Decorative—for decorative painting in its proper sense, as the Egyptians and, very probably, the Greeks and the Primitives understood it, is nothing other than a manifestation of art at once subjective, synthetic, symbolic, and

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<sup>201</sup> "La Danse engendre toute une plastique:...des mêmes membres composant, décomposant et recomposant leurs figures, ou de mouvements se répondant à intervalles égaux ou harmoniques, se forme un *ornement de la durée*, comme de la répétition de motifs dans l'espace, ou bien de leurs symétries, se forme *l'ornement de l'étendue*." Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 25-6.

<sup>202</sup> For Valéry "decoration in space" means the way in which dance, at its best, disembodies the corporeal leaving only forms or patterns in space.

idea-ist...decorative painting is, strictly speaking, the true art of painting. Painting can be created only to decorate with thoughts, dreams, and ideas the banal walls of human edifices. The easel-picture is nothing but an illogical refinement invented to satisfy...the commercial spirit in decadent civilizations.<sup>203</sup>

Earlier, critics contrasted the higher ideals of history painting with the “commercial spirit” of genre; now it was decorative painting, as the Symbolists’ defined it, which was thought to oppose genre. The large-scale mural format of certain Symbolist painting pointed to its deeper objectives:

The work of the painter begins where the architect is finished. Hence let us have walls, that we may paint over...There are no paintings, but only decorations.<sup>204</sup>

As opposed to small-scale easel painting in private homes, wall decoration, trailing the prestige of churches and public civic spaces, served as the medium and locus of choice for transmitting the eternal—that is, established—themes of monumental painting. “Orcagna, Giotto, Mantegna...their works take on a grandeur not acquired in easel painting,” Théophile Gautier wrote in mid-

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<sup>203</sup> “Décorative—car la peinture décorative proprement dite, telle que l’ont comprise les Égyptiens, très probablement les Grecs et les Primitifs, n’est rien autre chose qu’une manifestation d’art à la fois subjectif, synthétique, symboliste et idéiste...la peinture décorative c’est, à proprement parler, la vraie peinture. La peinture n’a pu être créée que pour *décorer* de pensées, de rêves et d’idées les murales banalités des édifices humains. Le tableau de chevalet n’est qu’un illogique raffinement inventé pour satisfaire...l’esprit commercial des civilisations décadents.” Aurier, “Le Symbolisme en Peinture: Paul Gauguin,” *Mercure de France* 2 (1891): 163. Translated in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), 92.

<sup>204</sup> “Le travail du peintre commence là où l’architecte considère le sien comme terminé. Des murs, des murs à décorer!...Il n’y a pas de tableaux, il n’y a que des décorations!” Jan Verkade, *Le Tourment De Dieu: Étapes d’un moine peintre* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1923), 94. Translated in Watkins, *Beyond the Easel*, 1.

century.<sup>205</sup> The latter was more suited to genre's predilection for the fashionable subjects of daily life, the pejoratively described "coquetteries à la mode."<sup>206</sup>

In keeping with the Symbolists' disdain for the materialist pursuit of likeness, Jan Verkade privileged decoration as emphasizing the literalness of its support:

"Down with perspective! The wall must remain a surface; it must not be pierced by the representation of infinite horizons."<sup>207</sup>

In his famous inaugural manifesto of 1890 Maurice Denis admonished:

"Remember that a picture, before being a battle horse, a nude, an anecdote or whatnot, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order."<sup>208</sup> In 1865, Gautier had approved of Puvis de Chavannes's art, an important inspiration for the Symbolists, on the grounds that his murals conformed to this first rule of adhering to the flatness of decorative painting.

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<sup>205</sup> "C'est à l'usage de la fresque que l'Italie doit la supériorité de ses écoles. La fresque, ou, pour parler plus exactement, la peinture murale, exige de sérieuses qualités; la composition, le dessin, le style y prévalent sur les délicatesses d'exécution perdues à distance; au contact de l'architecture, la peinture se fait plus fière et plus robuste: elle prend la mâle solidité des murailles de pierre et la force tranquille des colonnes de marbre: elle cherche à se faire éternelle comme l'édifice auquel elle est liée. Plus de petits effets mesquins, d'adroites ressources de métier, de coquetteries à la mode, mais une sérénité sévère, une beauté élevée et calme, un art pur et dédaigneux des vulgaires réalités: Orcagna, Giotto, Mantegna...ont pris dans ce travail une grandeur qui ne s'acquiert point aux tableaux de chevalets." Gautier, *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1856), 240-1.

<sup>206</sup> Writing of "une classe de peintres—ceux qu'on appelle de *genre*," the critic who used these words explained: "Il faut, en effet, à une société affairée et superficielle, un art facile à loger et facile à comprendre, car les appartements sont étroits et les affaires absorbantes." André Michel, "Le Salon de 1884," *L'Art*, xxxvi (1884): 163.

<sup>207</sup> "A bas la perspective! Le mur doit rester surface, ne doit pas être percé par la représentation d'horizons infinis." Verkade, *Le Tourment de dieu*, 94.

<sup>208</sup> "Se rappeler qu'un tableau—avant d'être un cheval de bataille, une femme nue, ou une quelconque anecdote—est essentiellement une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées." Denis, *Du Symbolisme au classicisme: Théories*, 33.

Advantageously for Symbolists working against the effects of illusionism and its materialist underpinnings, mural-sized painting meant to be viewed at a distance did not demand the same level of detail as easel painting, or “petite peinture.”<sup>209</sup> The Symbolist painter, Édouard Dujardin posed this rhetorical question in the service of affirming the bold contours of silhouette:

Why retrace the thousands of insignificant details the eye perceives? One must seize the essential trait...a silhouette suffices to express a physiognomy.<sup>210</sup>

Dujardin and his peers’ distinction between easel and mural painting disinterred a long tradition of French criticism which had assumed an intensity during the 1860s when the techniques appropriate to each seemed to be threatened by the confusion of genre and history. “A dead soldier on the battlefield cannot be painted with the same brush as a satin robe,” Thoré wrote in response to the Salon of 1861, distinguishing between the incidental illusionistic techniques appropriate to the subjects, formats and scale of genre, as opposed to history.<sup>211</sup> In the same year, Georges Lafenestre sounded an alarm, admonishing exhibitors at the Salon:

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<sup>209</sup> Ernest Chesneau, *Les Nations rivales dans l’art* (Paris: Didier et cie., 1862), 243.

<sup>210</sup> “Dès lors, à quoi bon retracer les mille détails insignifiants que l’œil perçoit? il faut prendre le trait essentiel...une silhouette suffit...” Dujardin, “Aux XX et aux Indépendants: Le Cloisonisme (1),” *La Revue indépendante* 6 (March 1888): 489.

<sup>211</sup> “Un soldat mort sur un champ de bataille ne saurait être peint avec le même brosse qu’une robe de satin.” Thoré continues: “La peinture en petit a ses lois conventionnelles qui contrarient les lois, non-seulement de la grande peinture, mais de toute peinture qui aborde des sujets d’une signification assez haute. Les kermesses de Teniers, peintes de grandeur naturelle, seraient intolérables, et l’on ne concevrait point en miniature les grandes fresques de Raphaël.” Thoré, *Salons de W. Bürger*, 49-50.

The first rule of composition...is the choice of suitable dimensions appropriate to what the work presents, and the appropriate mode of execution for these dimensions. Treat the miniature snuffbox like its dimensions. To treat a miniature snuffbox like a mural, or vice versa, is an intolerable error. Our contemporary naturalists are not convinced of this because they execute all in the same manner, by the same vague and summary methods the large-as-life figures or the microscopic figures, and the same brush, which is now the fashion, is used for painting giant works of which we must look at from twenty-fives paces and a reduced scene that must be considered under the nose.<sup>212</sup>

In 1862, Chesneau similarly cautioned:

Misled by habits of seeing or by those of executing genre paintings, [these artists] carry into their works of large dimensions the habits of this kind of painting; it is a capital error which must not go unchallenged.<sup>213</sup>

Degas's *Steeplechase* responded to these critical voices of the 1860s, pictorializing the foundational mistake that painters made by mixing up the techniques of genre and history, "*la peinture anecdotique*" and "*les grandes*

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<sup>212</sup> "...la première règle de la composition....c'est l'appropriation convenable de dimensions de l'oeuvre à l'intérêt qu'elle présente, celle du mode d'exécution à ces dimensions. Traiter une miniature de tabatière comme une dimensions. Traiter une miniature de tabatière comme une peinture murale, ou réciproquement, est erreur intolérable. Nos naturalistes contemporains n'en sont pas convaincus, car ils exécutent presque tous, de le même façon, par les mêmes procédés vagues et sommaires, les figures de grandeur naturelle ou des figures microscopiques, et le même coup de brosse, provisoirement à la mode est employé sans différence pour peindre une étude gigantesque qu'il faut regarder à vingt-cinq pas et une scène réduite qu'on doit examiner sous le nez." Lafenestre, *Le Livre d'or du Salon de peinture et de sculpture* (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles, 1885), iv.

<sup>213</sup> "Dévoyés par l'habitude de voir ou d'exécuter des tableaux de genre, [these artists] transportent dans des ouvrages de grandes dimensions les habitudes de cette sorte de peinture; erreur capitale qu'il ne faut point laisser passer sans protester." Chesneau, *Les Nations rivaux dans l'art*, 243.



*toiles.*”<sup>214</sup> In addition to using a mural-sized canvas for what was ostensibly a genre subject of contemporary life, Degas also transposed the precise techniques of easel painting to that of mural-sized painting. The genre-like and descriptive delicacy of handling and tonality of the fallen jockey’s face is one detail that offers a strong sense of the painting’s appearance when it first hung at the Salon of 1864, described by Jean Sutherland Boggs: “He was meticulously observant of the jockey’s hair—the thin wiry strokes of a new beard, the heavier weaving of the mustache, the soft brush of the generous eyebrows, and the weight of the locks receding from his forehead.”<sup>215</sup>

“Divided against himself” was how Valéry characterized the artist, one that aptly characterizes the nature of Degas’s subsequent revisions of *The Steeplechase*. What one sees standing before the painting in its present state is the self-repudiating struggle of an artist *against himself*, against his own earlier naturalism. Reworking the jockey’s right hand, Degas now smudges it into non-existence; an abstract patch of brownish-black *pentimenti* is a vestige of its original presence. The addition of jet-black marks—like those that outline the nearest horse, its belly and head (which Cassatt thought defaced it), around the fallen jockey’s jodhpurs, on the nose of the mounted rider and the back of the uppermost horse—starkly contrast with the painting’s coloristic subtlety, that

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<sup>214</sup> Calonne, “La Peinture contemporaine à l’exposition de 1861,” 352.

<sup>215</sup> Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, 58.

“delicacy of tone” noted when it first hung at the Salon.<sup>216</sup> Dematerialized, too, by these black lines that circumscribe them, the softly-shifting copper-browns of the horses’ coats, moving from sorrel to mahogany bay, suggest less the *illusion* of true presence than the *fact* of painting’s true substance as defined by Denis: “a flat surface covered with colors.” Now repositioned horizontally, the central horse runs in parallel with the horizontal line of the wall-like support, drawing attention to it. So, too, does the addition of the loosely-brushed row of trees which line the horizon (absent in the original version of the painting).<sup>217</sup> These same trees appear in some of Degas’s coeval paintings of dancers in which they more literally assert their artifice and decorative status in the form of stage decoration.

If in the original version of *The Steeplechase* we find a commentary on the conditions of ambitious painting in the 1860s, in the revisions of the 1890s we find an updated commentary to do with its decorative turn—or, more precisely, return—to a kind of painting at one with the wall. As if turning back the clock on the naturalist reform of advanced painting, Degas’s stylized strokes realign *The Steeplechase* with the generalized manner that critics from Thoré to Denis thought appropriate to such a scale. In doing so, Degas implicitly rectifies genre’s perceived failure to achieve the self-sufficiency and dramatic power of the *tableau*. “The care for detail” and “love for *fini*,” as Paul Mantz wrote of

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<sup>216</sup> Cassatt writes: “Joseph [Durand-Ruel] bought for Fr 9,000 the splendid picture of the steeple chase. Degas you know wanted to retouch it and drew black lines over the horse’s head and wanted to change the movement...I thought these could be effaced but it was not possible.” Quoted in Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, 162, 164.

<sup>217</sup> X-rays taken by the conservators at the National Gallery of Art in Washington prove their absence from the original.

Delaroche's *Duc de Guise*, could only weaken the dramatic power of a scene:

"The skill of the hand cannot replace force and energy."<sup>218</sup> Degas, then, "corrects" this debility of genre.

The nature of these revisions of *The Steeplechase*, undertaken while Degas was working on *The Fallen Jockey*, brings us closer to appreciating the force of the latter's effects: it reaches toward the stylized contours of decorative painting, seizing hold of decoration's alliance with the mural format of *grande peinture*. The limited palette—mainly green, yellow, blue and black—replaces *The Steeplechase*'s coloristic effects with blunter, muddied, heavy browns and greens. A more jolting rhythm replaces the continuous gradations achieved by *chiaroscuro*: white tunic against yellow trousers, yellow trousers against black boots. The horse's white-yellow hoof strikes a note against its brown body. Hoof from horse, limb from limb, sky from earth: Degas prises apart those elements that naturalism's adherents blended and smoothed together. Neither sky nor grass recedes, but tilt upwards, evoking the wall-like support. Unanchored within its steep perspective, the jockey floats as if suspended by invisible wires. Turned more emphatically in profile now, his silhouette, like that of the horse, resists the illusion of spatial recession, as do the crude inky marks—cruder now than those of *The Steeplechase*—that circumscribe his body. If we are reminded of the Old

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<sup>218</sup> "Quant aux scènes dramatiques, ou l'habileté de la main ne peut tenir lieu de vigueur et d'énergie, M. Delaroche est plus faible. *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* le prouve, et au-delà.... Je recommande surtout aux sympathies des curieux le vêtement du duc de Guise: velours, satin, pierreries, tous est d'un fini, d'un effet, qui plairont même à des critiques." Mantz, "Une exposition hors de Louvre. David et son école. —Prudhon. —MM. Paul Delaroche, H. Vernet, A. Scheffer, etc.," *L'Artiste* 4 (18 January 1846): 188.

Masters who used carbon and charcoal to delineate their forms or of those masters of fresco, like Giotto, who used broad bands of color to delineate sky's separation from earth, this is probably because we are meant to.<sup>219</sup> "It has been the ambition of my life to paint on walls," Degas revealed to the dealer Ambroise Vollard during a discussion about fresco.<sup>220</sup> *The Fallen Jockey* may be the closest Degas came to expressing that ambition in paint. *To move painting towards painting on the wall*: this is the overwhelming impression before this immense canvas, with its green ground tilting upward to meet its support. It asks to be seen from afar.

### 3.1.4 Mourning the past, revisiting Manet's *Dead Toreador*

If *The Fallen Jockey* aims to reprise the powerful effect of large-scale ambitious painting by means of repudiating genre in favor of the decorative, one nevertheless suspects that something of the painting's tragic aspect is permeated by the artist's knowing impossibility of this very pursuit, that there is no real way to collapse the temporal distance that separates the achievements of the past from the present. *The Fallen Jockey* does not offer up the beauty of an idealized form nor of an unclothed truth: what we have in the end is not so much an image conveying a received classical ideal, but an image flayed of genre's humanizing particulars. What we find is not the dense impregnability of a frescoed wall, but

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<sup>219</sup> According to Degas's niece, Jeanne Fevre, Degas's library contained "des ouvrages sur la technique du peintre, en particulier ce traité étonnant de Cenino Cenini sur la fresque." Fevre, *Mon oncle Degas*, 26.

<sup>220</sup> "Ça [a] été le rêve de toute ma vie de peindre des murs." Ambroise Vollard, *Degas (1834-1917)* (Paris: Georges Crès & Cie, 1924), 77-8.

paint on more vulnerable bare canvas. The scraped paint at the lower left reveals its raw state, like a wound; and the darkened palette shrouds itself as if acknowledging a loss.

Degas's work in these years—with sculpture left deliberately unstable, uncast in bronze and meant to disintegrate, and with drawings on delicate and non-durable tracing paper—affectively marks the passage of time. “There is much decaying sculpture,” George Moore observed when he visited the artist's studio in 1890.<sup>221</sup> When Durand-Ruel inventoried the contents of the studio after Degas's death, he noted “about one hundred and fifty pieces [of sculpture] scattered over the three floors in every possible place.”<sup>222</sup> As Degas “never took care of them,” most of the sculptures were in pieces, “some almost reduced to dust.”<sup>223</sup> As if to explain the substantive impermanence of these sculptures held together by various makeshift materials like wire and corkscrew, Degas said, “They are exercises to get me going; documents, nothing more; none of them are intended for sale.”<sup>224</sup> But that Degas attached significance to the process of their decay is suggested by the bas-relief sculpture *Picking Apples* (1882), a clay relief of half life-size figures (of which only a small wax replica survives.) “I had seen by him a bas-relief which he let fall and crumble to dust; it was as beautiful as that of the ancients,”

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<sup>221</sup> George Moore, “Degas: The Painter of Modern Life,” *Magazine of Art* 13 (1890): 416.

<sup>222</sup> Letter from the dealer to Royal Cortissoz on June 7, 1919. Quoted in *Personalities in Art* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), 245.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> “Ce sont des exercices pour me mettre en train; du document, sans plus. Rien de tout cela n'est fait pour la vente.” Quoted in Thiébault-Sisson, *Degas, Le Modelé et l'espace*, 179.

Renoir said.<sup>225</sup> Of this same sculpture, Albert Bartholomé observed that “the artist did nothing to preserve his work, which later on literally crumbled to dust.”<sup>226</sup>

Tellingly, Jacques-Émile Blanche, to whom Degas showed this work, alerts us to the fact that the sculpture was a funerary decoration of the sort the artist would have seen in the Etruscan wing of the Louvre:

He led me to his studio where he showed me a new sculpture he had made. In it, a young girl, half reclining in a coffin is eating fruit. To one side is a mourner’s bench of the child’s family—for this is a tomb.<sup>227</sup>

Blanche’s testimony, along with that of Bartholomé and Renoir—“he *let* fall and crumble”—suggests the artist’s acquiescence to and complicity with decay, a process that affectively paralleled the eschatological subject of the sculpture, a sculpture that in turn exhumed ancient models from a disappeared civilization.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> “J’ai vu de lui un bas-relief qu’il laissait tomber en poussière, c’était beau comme l’antique.” Quoted in Ambroise Vollard, *Auguste Renoir* (Paris: Georges Crès & Cie, 1920), 95.

<sup>226</sup> “L’auteur ne fit rien pour préserver son oeuvre qui tomba plus tard littéralement en poussière.” Paul-André Lemoisne, “Les Statuettes de Degas,” *Art et Décoration* 36 (September-October 1919): 110.

<sup>227</sup> Unpublished letter, Archives, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Cited in Boggs, *Degas*, 359.

<sup>228</sup> At the least, the manifest impermanence of Degas’s late media suggests a theoretical affinity with the concerns of *The Fallen Jockey*, related to its fundamental inquiry into the viability of serious art in the modern era. Historically the issue of durability figured centrally in such evaluations. “La seule substitution d’un corps stable et immobile à un châssis, à un panneau portatif, exerce sur l’artiste une saine influence, l’aguerrit contre ses faiblesses, le détourne des penchans [*sic*] mercantiles et capricieux,” Ludovic Vitet wrote in 1852, representing those critics for whom the fixed support, such as the mural or fresco, was the *sine qua non* of ambitious art. Vitet continued: “Tous ces chefs-d’oeuvre de pacotille seront oubliés dans quelque vingt ans d’ici; il auront cede la place à d’autres produits fabriqués sur de nouveaux patrons, et seront allés finir leurs jours dans le pays des tableaux hors de mode, aux États-Unis d’Amérique ou dans le fond de nos greniers. Ce qui vivra, ce qui portera témoignage de notre savoir-faire, ce qui donnera la mesure de nos artistes, ce sera cette série de peintures qui depuis douze à quinze ans se fixent sur nos murailles, tableaux qui ne voyagent pas, et qui pour la plupart sont aussi sérieusement conçus et exécutés que solidement établis” (“Beaux-Arts – Les peintures de Saint-Vincent de Paul et de l’hôtel-de-ville,” *Revue des deux mondes* 4 (1853), 1003-4). It is not accidental that Puvis de Chavannes, the artist representative of the French tradition of classicism at the *fin-de-*

If Degas's *Fallen Jockey* admits its own impermanence, conceding the ineluctable distance separating itself from that of the classical ideal, the painting does at least clear the impasse that naturalism seemed to put in its way, staking a claim for an alternative course for painting, analogous to that promoted by the Symbolists, to do with "reducing the fictive depth of painting."<sup>229</sup> "The bull is like a carelessly cut silhouette," one critic observed of Manet's *Incident* at the Salon of 1864, struck by the flatness of its sharp contrasts of dark and light forms.<sup>230</sup> "Cut out of the canvas like a sledge hammer,"<sup>231</sup> the same critic complained, findings its effect of flatness made too emphatic by, as another critic wrote, "the audacity of putting black beside yellow."<sup>232</sup> "Manet has decided to use only his ink well," wrote another, disturbed by the inky black marks that circumscribed his forms.<sup>233</sup> Echoing this criticism, another critic described Manet

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*siècle*, to whom the Symbolists turned for inspiration, often painted on the kind of fixed and solid supports advocated by Vitet. The decade's enthusiasm for decorative art *in opposition to genre* revived the traditional values apparent in the critic's remarks, written in response to those very debates surrounding genre versus history, easel versus mural.

<sup>229</sup> Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed., John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 221.

<sup>230</sup> "Est-il possible d'entendre ainsi la transparence des ombres! Le taureau ressemble à une silhouette noire découpée sans le moindre soin." Louis Leroy, "Salon de 1864," *Le Charivari* (22 May 1864). Translated in George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 55.

<sup>231</sup> "Seul le mort du premier plan a une certaine gravité; il pousse moins à la gaîté que les autres, bien qu'il soit taillé à coups de serpe dans la toile." Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> "Dans l'*Episode d'une course de taureaux*, nous ne saurions rien voir que la hardiesse de mettre du noir sur du jaune." Joseph-Augustin Du Pays, "Salon de 1864," *L'Illustration* (16 July 1864). Translated in Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*, 53.

<sup>233</sup> "On reprochait à M. Manet de peindre avec une brosse à cirage. Son *Episode d'un combat de taureaux* est-il moins noir?" Léon Lagrange, "Salon de 1864," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 1, no. 16 (1 June 1864). Translated in Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*, 54.

as the “young man who paints with ink and constantly drops the inkwell.”<sup>234</sup>

These are some of the voices that the effects of *The Fallen Jockey* resurrect, accentuating as it does these features of a kind of painting self-consciously aware of being one. The bold outlining of forms and the sharp contrasts of light against dark, of yellow trousers against black boots, sends us back in time to that originary moment when a new kind of painting appeared at the deathbed of *grande peinture*, painted by “this young man” who Degas met, so legend tell us, in the grand halls of the Louvre while tracing Velazquez’s *Infanta Margarita* onto a copper plate.

There is another way in which, in addition to its decorative flatness, *The Fallen Jockey* reroutes us back to this earlier moment by way of contemporary Symbolist aesthetics, and in an effort to strike an alterative mode of advancing the course of ambitious painting. This is to say, there is another way in which Degas furthers his dialogue with Manet that had begun four decades earlier with respect to forging a new kind of painting; in this instance, by drawing out the expressive potential of the affinity between painting and a form of anti-naturalist theater, one that Manet’s *Incident* itself seemed to adumbrate.

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<sup>234</sup> “Ce jeune homme, qui peint à l’encre et laisse à chaque instant tomber son écritoire, finira par ne plus exaspérer le bourgeois.” Edmond About, *Salon de 1864* (Paris: Librairie De L. Hachette, 1864), 156-7. Translated in Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*, 53.



## 3.2 Avant-garde theatre

### 3.2.1 Duranty's *théâtre de Polichinelle* and Manet's *Incident in a Bullfight*

In his famous essay, "On the Marionette Theater," of 1810, Heinrich von Kleist foresaw the grounds for its revival at mid-century: "It would never be guilty of affectation."<sup>235</sup> Due to its lack of self-consciousness, Kleist recognized the marionette as a powerful way to move past the flat conventions of sentimentality, *grimace* and gesture, those same qualities that were also thought to plague the pictorial arts. "The force which raises them into the air is greater than the one which draws them to the ground," Kleist wrote, describing the metaphysical reach of the marionette, its ability to reinstate the transcendent *idée*.<sup>236</sup> Edmond Duranty recognized this potential of the marionette when he composed his collection of plays for the Théâtre de Polichinelle, "a *written theater* for marionettes."<sup>237</sup> In Manet's drawing of 1862, *The Balloon* (**fig. 30**), we can see the wooden structure of the marionette theatre Duranty opened in 1861 in the public gardens of the Tuileries. These gardens were a meeting place for the most important artists of the

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<sup>235</sup> Heinrich Von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre" in *Essays on Dolls*, trans., Idris Parry and Paul Keegan (London: Syrens, 1994), 5.

<sup>236</sup> Kleist, *Essays on Dolls*, 7. Interestingly, Kleist's essay centers on the subject of dance. The essay takes the form of a dialogue between the narrator and a dancer who explains that the marionette's movements represent an ideal after which he can only imperfectly strive. Kleist's essay was not translated into French until 1947, but was mentioned in the first French monograph on Kleist in 1896 by Raymond Marie Aurélien Bonafous, *Henri de Kleist, Sa vie et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Hachette, 1894), 163.

<sup>237</sup> "J'ai donc composé un *théâtre écrit* de Marionnettes." Duranty, *Théâtre des marionnettes du jardin des Tuileries* (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1880), n.p. Full passage cited and translated in Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 473.

day including Baudelaire and Jules Champfleury, who were themselves involved in various aspects of Duranty's theater. Gustave Courbet even created its stage décor. Inspired by the stylized aesthetic of the Italian *commedia dell'arte* then in vogue, Duranty found in the overt artifice of the marionette a theatrical alternative to the affected naturalism of the traditional model whose masquerades and poses he would go on to mock in *The New Painting*. The simple constrained movements of the marionettes seemed to convey an expressive force more authentic and affecting than that of the real actors', striking the deepest chords of human emotion, with something of the force of medieval Christmas mystery plays for which the marionette theatre was first used. Emphasizing the quality of the marionette world with animals that flew fancifully across the stage possessed by magical powers, like the crow in *La Fortune du Ramoneur*, Duranty showed off the marionette's ability to get at the *gravitas* of myth, "the eternal, fantastic depths" of myth.<sup>238</sup> This was recognized by at least one critic who urged his readers to visit the Tuileries gardens: "Serious art is hiding there, in this wooden hut, on this marionette stage."<sup>239</sup>

Théophile Gautier, another playwright whose works emulated the stylized manner and stock character types of the *commedia dell'arte* acknowledged a principal source of inspiration, the famous marionette performances of George Sand whose theatre opened in 1847 to audiences of the French intellectual and

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<sup>238</sup> "...le Tonneau, la Grand' Main et la Poule noire abordent l'éternel fond fantastique, ou plutôt le fantastique sans fond." Duranty, *Théâtre des marionnettes*, 387.

<sup>239</sup> "Cette baraque en bois où s'est réfugié l'art sérieux." Anonymous, *Artiste* (15 October 1861): 185.

artistic élite. Gautier dedicated his essay of 1852, “Les Marionnettes,” in which he surveyed the history of the art form, to her. In the same year, Charles Magnin devoted significant attention to her theatrical contributions in his important publication, *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe*. Sand herself articulated the terms of her contribution describing the dreamlike and fantastic plays that she staged in her home with her son Maurice Sand as a corrective to naturalist theatre.<sup>240</sup> In her popular novel, *L’Homme de neige* of 1859, the protagonist explains the appeal of “a theatre of automats,” as Duranty himself would come to see it: “The more they are increased in size and made to look like real men, the more the spectacle of these false actors will sadden and terrify.”<sup>241</sup>

The aesthetic of the marionette stage had application for at least one young painter. Manet’s paintings of the 1860s, such as *An Incident in a Bullfight*, point to some of the formal aspects of the marionette theater, as Michael Fried has proposed, in their disjunctions of scale between foreground and background, in this instance the fallen torero and the toreros and bulls in the distance.<sup>242</sup> “Large things reduced, small objects magnified,” was Duranty’s description of the spatial oddities of his marionette stage to which, as Fried further suggests, Manet might

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<sup>240</sup> See “Le Theatre et l’Acteur” [1958] in George Sand, *Œuvres autobiographiques*, ed. Georges Lubin, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 1239–48.

<sup>241</sup> “L’avantage l’art pourrait retirer d’un theatre d’automates....Plus on les fera grands et semblables à des hommes, plus le spectacle de ces acteurs postiches sera une chose triste et même effrayante.” Sand, *L’Homme de neige* (Paris: L. Hachette et cie., 1859), 245. For an excellent history of the marionette theatre in France see Keith Tribble’s *European Symbolist Theatre: Conventions and Innovations* (Diss. University of Washington, Seattle, 1990), in particular Chapter Three, “Symbolist Marionette Theatre.”

<sup>242</sup> Fried writes: “It is, I think, not inconceivable that Manet’s experience of the puppet theatre encouraged him in the direction of the willed, intense naïveté—the deliberate, almost painful crudeness,” of *The Music in the Tuileries* (1862). Fried, *Manet’s Modernism*, 473.

even allude in two of his etchings of 1862 for his *Collection de huit eaux-fortes* that illustrate scenes and characters of the *commedia dell'arte*.<sup>243</sup> Many of the caricatures that parodied Manet's *Incident* when it hung at the Salon of 1864 hyperbolized these spatial oddities, even implying the painting's connection with the marionette theater. One, for instance, in *Le Journal amusant*, by the caricaturist Bertall, emphasized the stage-like quality of the bullring and the doll-like stiffness of the toreador (**fig. 31**).<sup>244</sup> The description that accompanied another caricature—"a wooden toreador killed by a horned rat"—alludes both to the distortion of scale and wooden materiality of the marionette world.<sup>245</sup>

Aside from its formal affinity with Duranty's stage, the markedly blank face of the torero itself suggests a shared loss of faith in the expressive norms of an older art. The subject of *An Incident*, a theatrical one—of the world of the stage, costume, and performance—seems even to thematize this problem of the post-romantic era with regards to the viability of pictorializing tragedy when the old, theatrical conventions for doing so had gone flat. Manet's *Dead Christ with Angels* (**fig. 32**), which was exhibited next to *An Incident* at the Salon, seems to reflect this sense of loss with regard to the conventional representation of death in

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<sup>243</sup> "Grandes choses rapetissées, petits objets suragrandis, maisons inhabitables, arbres nains, lits de Procuste, montagnes microscopiques, mais bouteilles géantes, marmites colossales, casseroles, fusils, sabers, parapluies monumentaux." Duranty, *Théâtre des marionnettes*, n.p. For Fried's discussion of Manet's *Collection de huit eaux-fortes* see *Manet's Modernism*, 48-53.

<sup>244</sup> Theodore Reff, *Manet's Incident in a Bullfight* (New York: Frick Collection, 2005), 9.

<sup>245</sup> "Un torero de bois tué par un rat cornu." About, *Salon de 1864*, 157. Translated in Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 53.

Christian tragedy.<sup>246</sup> We sense this in its odd mix of piety tinged with implications of satire (Christ's wound is on the wrong side of his chest; his feet are swollen and his hands sullied). Further, the congruence of such elements even points to the character of Duranty's marionette stage whose mixed inheritance derived, on the one hand, from a pious religious function (the *Crèches*, or the Nativity plays) and, on the other hand, the *commedia dell'arte* and the satiric folk tradition of quotidian themes.

### 3.2.2 The symbolist marionette stage

Duranty's theater was short-lived (it closed in 1870 during the Siege of Paris), but it had an afterlife three decades later when Symbolist playwrights rediscovered the powerful emotional impact of the marionette. "Symbolism," as Keith Tribble writes, "made palpable the romantic dream of a serious literary theatre of marionettes."<sup>247</sup> Indeed, almost every one of the major figures of the Symbolist stage wrote for the marionette theatre, including among them Maurice Bouchor, Alfred Jarry, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, Maurice Maeterlinck and Paul Ranson. Indicative of the renewed interest in the form, at the major theatre exhibition in Paris at the Palace of Industry in 1896, some of the four hundred

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<sup>246</sup> As with his toreador, Manet depicts Christ in some uncertain state between life and death, resurrection and burial. Thoré describes the painting's subject: "Peut-être est-il en train de ressusciter, sous les ailes des deux anges qui l'assistent." *Salons de W. Bürger*, I: 99. Quoted in Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 517-8, note 76.

<sup>247</sup> Tribble, *European Symbolist Theatre*, 273.

marionettes of George and Maurice Sand's puppet theatre were exhibited.<sup>248</sup>

During the decade, Maurice Sand's marionette plays were published for the first time (1895) and Sand's novel *L'Homme de Neige* was republished (1897). A few years earlier, in 1892, Lemercier de Neuville published *L'Histoire anecdotique des marionnettes modernes* intended to further and update Charles Magnin's *Histoire des marionnettes en Europe*. In the preface to de Neuville's publication, Jules Claretie, who was witness to Duranty's performances in the 1860s, explicitly linked the marionette stage of the 1890s with this earlier one.<sup>249</sup>

Like Duranty, the Symbolists' also drew on the expressive force of the marionette's anti-naturalism in order to circumvent the tired conventions of the traditional stage, rejecting, for instance, the naturalist stage of André Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* which they scorned for its learned theatricalism. Considered one of the revitalizing forces of French theatre, Henri Signoret's *Petit Théâtre des Marionnettes*, which opened at the Galerie Vivienne in 1888, utilized the marionette in order to convey "the total expression of human feelings"—often with an emphasis on the tragic—and in an unaffected way.<sup>250</sup> In an appreciative review of Signoret's plays, the popular theatre critic, Anatole France, explained

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<sup>248</sup> Léo Claretie, *Histoire des théâtres de société* (Paris: Librairie Molière, 1906), 266.

<sup>249</sup> "Vous en écrivez aujourd'hui l'Histoire,—avec celle d'autres théâtres similaires, comme celui du bon romancier Duranty et de Maurice Sand—et vous avez raison. Votre livre...complète si joliment les travaux de Charles Magnin..." Claretie in Lemercier de Neuville, *L'Histoire anecdotique des marionnettes modernes* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1892), vi. De Neuville included in his publication Duranty's article of 1862 in which Duranty recounted the process of setting up his stage in the Tuileries gardens.

<sup>250</sup> "Les fantoches, impersonnels, êtres de bois et de carton, possèdent une vie falote et mystérieuse.... Dans leurs gestes essentiels tient l'expression complète de tous les sentiments humains." Paul Margueritte, *Le petit théâtre (théâtre de marionnettes)* (Paris: Librairie illustrée, 1888), 7.

the advantage of marionettes over real life actors in familiar, Kleistian terms:

“Their personality obliterates the work they are interpreting.”<sup>251</sup> For this reason, while the playwright Alfred Jarry did not use marionettes he nevertheless still sought “to make of the actor a marionette,” instructing the actor to mimic the stiff, awkward movements of the puppet.<sup>252</sup>

For Maurice Maeterlinck, a major force in the development of the French Symbolist stage, whose quieter, shadowy and more mystical plays differed from Jarry’s fairground style of the Guignol, the very realness of the stage actor intercepted the materialization of the abstract idea. “The day we see Hamlet die in the theater, something of him dies for us,” he wrote.<sup>253</sup> He elaborated, “Every masterpiece is a symbol and the symbol will not tolerate the active presence of man.” For Maeterlinck, the marionette served as a model of concise symbolic expression, in keeping with Mallarmé’s conception of performance as a universe of symbols ideally unimpeded by physical reality.<sup>254</sup> Two of the plays Maeterlinck wrote for marionettes, *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1893) and *The Death of Tintagiles* (1894), looked back to the simple power of ancient art, specifically to classical Athenian tragedy. The simplicity of the marionette was well suited to its stark symbolic import.

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<sup>251</sup> “Leur personne efface l’oeuvre qu’ils représentent.” France, “Les Marionettes de M. Signoret” in *La Vie littéraire*, vol. 2 (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1899), 148.

<sup>252</sup> Quoted in Tribble, *European Symbolist Theatre*, 684. For a discussion of Duranty’s influence on Jarry see 263-5.

<sup>253</sup> “Quelque chose d’Hamlet est mort pour nous, le jour où nous l’avons vu mourir sur la scène.” Maeterlinck, “Menus Propos—Le theater,” *La Jeune Belgique* (September 1890): 332.

<sup>254</sup> “Tout chef-d’oeuvre est un symbole et le symbole ne supporte jamais la présence active de l’homme.” Ibid., 334.

Anatole France's review of Signoret's marionette performances, which, like Maeterlinck's, tended to be based on traditional texts, including Cervante's novel *Don Quixote*, and classical works by authors including Aristophanes and Sophocles, summarizes for us the paradoxical appeal of the marionette at the turn of the century, the way in which its crude simplicity enabled the meaningful representation of these august narratives for the present age.

A beautiful marionette like you surpasses the actress of flesh. You are very small, but you appear great because you are simple. In your place a living actress appears small. Moreover, there is no one else today that can express religious sentiment like you...A truly artistic idea, a truly elegant and noble thought, enters the wooden head of a puppet more easily than the brain of a fashionable actress...The puppet is august: it comes out of the sanctuary. The puppet or *mariote* was originally a small Virgin Mary, a pious image. And the Parisian street, where they sold these figurines in the past, was called the rue des Mariettes et des Marionnettes. It is Magnin who says it, the learned historian of puppets...Yes, the marionette comes out of the sanctuary... the marionettes played the mysteries and represented the drama of the Passion...Similarly, in Greece and Rome, the articulated dolls first had a role in the cult ceremonies of worship.<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> "Elle était innocente comme un poète, c'est pourquoi je l'aime....Une belle marionette comme vous y surpassera les actrices de chair. Vous êtes toute petite, mais vous paraîtrez grande parce que vous êtes simple. Tandis qu'à votre place une actrice vivante semblerait petite. D'ailleurs il n'y a plus que vous aujourd'hui pour exprimer le sentiment religieux. Voilà ce que je lui dirai, et elle sera peut-être persuadée. Une idée véritablement artiste, une pensée élégante et noble, cela doit entrer dans la tête de bois d'une marionnette plus facilement que dans le cerveau d'une actrice à la mode. En attendant, j'ai vu deux fois les marionnettes de la rue Vivienne et j'y ai pris un grand plaisir. Je leur sais un gré infini de remplacer les acteurs vivants. S'il faut dire toute ma pensée, les acteurs me gâtent la comédie. J'entends les bons acteurs. Je m'accommoderais encore des autres! mais ce sont les artistes excellents, comme il s'en trouve à la Comédie-Française, que décidément je ne puis souffrir. Leur talent est trop grand: il couvre tout. Il n'y a qu'eux. Leur personne efface l'oeuvre qu'ils représentent. Ils sont considérables....Il y faut un goût vif et même



### 3.2.3 “Like a puppet”

“Degas rejected all softness, he seized an ankle, but not the flesh,” Meier-Graefe wrote in his monograph of 1917, vividly describing the pained, mortuary tones of the artist’s late works: “Human backs are bent in anguish, arms howl and legs whine.”<sup>256</sup> “His structures lay claim to the term anatomy, but composed out of visionary skeletons.”<sup>257</sup> Meier-Graefe went on to use the metaphor of the puppet to describe the tragic aspect of such figures. “The puppets which nestle together softly in Ingres, move by taut wires in Degas, and their motion is the dance of death.”<sup>258</sup> “Tortured puppets,” was how he described the late dancers.<sup>259</sup> Valéry drew on the same analogy when he saw one of the artist’s drawings of the subject: “He had not so much drawn it as constructed it joint by joint like a puppet: a leg and arm, both sharply bent, the body rigid.”<sup>260</sup> Both critics might have described the figure of Degas’s late *Fallen Jockey* similarly: his left leg is angular and sharply bent, the body rigid; the jockey’s arms, now tragically extended, seem

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un peu de vénération. La marionnette est auguste: elle sort du sanctuaire. La marionnette ou *mariote* fut originairement une petite vierge Marie, une pieuse image. Et la rue de Paris, où l’on vendait autrefois ces figurines, s’appelait rue des Mariettes et des Marionnettes. C’est Magnin qui le dit, Magnin le savant historien des marionnettes, et il n’est pas tout à fait impossible qu’il dise vrai, bien que ce ne soit pas la coutume des historiens. Oui, les marionnettes sont sorties du sanctuaire....les marionnettes jouaient des mystères et représentaient le drame de la Passion...Du même, en Grèce et à Rome, les poupées articulées eurent d’abord un rôle dans les cérémonies du culte; puis elles perdirent leur caractère religieux....” France, “Les Marionnettes de M. Signoret,” 9.

<sup>256</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, trans., J. Holroyd-Reece (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1923), 79.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>260</sup> “Il l’avait non tant dessinée que véritablement construite et articulée en pantin: un bras et une jambe coudés net, le corps raide...” Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 9. Translated in Valéry, *Degas Manet Morisot*, 20.

strung taut by the wires of a wooden cross, the puppeteer's control whose presence Meier-Graefe sensed. (Degas, in fact, used such means to hold the stretched limbs of his dancers in position.) The jockey's garments now clothe what seems like the soft stuffing of a puppet, not the solid flesh of a muscular body. Indeed, a marionette, though made of a wooden core, was covered with cloth and padded with straw, wood shavings or rags, we learn from John McCormick's study of the puppet theater in Degas's time. "Their hands and forearms were carved in one piece [and]...it was quite common for the right hand to be closed (thumb touching index finger), so as to hold a weapon or stick, and for the left hand to remain open."<sup>261</sup> The jockey's right hand, its fingers undifferentiated, and the jockey's left hand, clenched shut, recall the wooden hands of these marionettes; and the thin, black line that extends from the jockey's fist perhaps indicates his whip. His beard, now thick and dark, recalls the folk or rural character popular in the marionette theater.

The years when Degas worked most intensely on *The Steeplechase* and *The Fallen Jockey*, during the 1860s and 1890s, coincided with the avant-garde revival of the marionette theater. Needless to say, I do not think this is a coincidence.

"Degas never missed a performance,"<sup>262</sup> Degas's friend, the singer Jeanne Raunay, tells us, referring to Degas's attendance at the marionette shows in the Parisian

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<sup>261</sup> John McCormick and Bennie Pratasik, *Popular Puppet Theatre In Europe, 1800-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 132.

<sup>262</sup> "Degas ne manquait pas une de ces repetitions." Raunay, "Degas, souvenirs anecdotiques," *La Revue de France* (1 April 1931): 470. Translated in Richard Kendall, Douglas Druick and Arthur Beale, *Degas and the Little Dancer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 57.

apartment of Madame Jeanniot where wooden puppets in antique costumes moved to “old and discreet music from another age.”<sup>263</sup> Madame Jeanniot’s husband often accompanied Degas to the more lighthearted marionette plays at the fun fair in the Place Pigalle, close to the artist’s studio on the rue Victor Massé.<sup>264</sup> Jeanniot tells us Degas enjoyed the naive spectacle of “the engines, the wooden horses and the roar of animals.”<sup>265</sup> “When I come back from the races, I use these as models,” Degas once told Vollard, picking up a wooden toy horse from his work table.<sup>266</sup> At the Place Pigalle, Jeanniot reflected on the “child-like” nature of his elderly friend.<sup>267</sup> Vollard similarly recounts the time when a delivery boy entered the studio carrying a basket of toys, entrancing Degas: “Isn’t that a magnificent soldier? And what do you think of the doll? The elephant is for me...It was the trunk that tickled me most; see how it lifts up when I pull the

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<sup>263</sup> “Une musique, une vieille et discrète musique d’autrefois, accompagnait toujours la pantomime des petits acteurs de bois.” Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> “In the mid-1890s there were about ten permanent outdoor puppet booths or castelets in Paris, manned by well-known talented performers...boasting exquisitely made puppets.” Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry: An Imagination in Revolt* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 151. In 1888, Degas wrote to Albert Bartholomé while vacationing in the Cauterets: “J’irai tout de même à la Mascotte....Ce qu’il y a de préférable à tout, c’est le vrai théâtre Polichinelle. Sur l’Esplanade, le soir, je m’y attache, mais je n’ose répondre et parler à Polichinelle comme les enfants assis sur les bancs et dont Polichinelle écoute ou dédaigne les avis, suivant son humeur. C’est une des meilleures choses de Cauterets pour l’esprit, peut-être la seule.” Degas, *Lettres de Degas*, 121.

<sup>265</sup> “...des engins, des chevaux de bois et du rugissement des fauves...” Georges Jeanniot, “Souvenirs sur Degas,” *Revue universelle* 55.14 (15 October 1933): 168. Translated in Kendall, *Degas and the Little Dancer*, 57.

<sup>266</sup> “—Lorsque je reviens du champ de courses, voilà mes modelés.” Vollard, *Degas*, 58. Translated in Ambroise Vollard, *Degas, An Intimate Portrait*, trans., Randolph T. Weaver (New York: Greenberg, 1927), 56. For photographs of these toy horses see Daphne S. Barbour and Shelly G. Sturman, “The Horse in Wax and Bronze” in Boggs, *Degas At the Races*, 1998.

<sup>267</sup> “...Degas est resté, par certains côtés, un véritable enfant.” Jeanniot, “Souvenirs sur Degas,” 168.

string?”<sup>268</sup> Meier-Graefe may have reflected along the same lines when he compared Degas’s dancers to stringed puppets; although, we know that he in fact thought the youthful aesthetic conveyed nothing less than the tragic cast of the eschatological: “*Their motion is the dance of death.*”<sup>269</sup> (We recall Degas’s predilection for collapsing the distance between past and present, feeling, for instance, the sadness of the aged artist when he was only twenty-four years old.)

Richard Kendall was the first to account for Degas’s interest in the marionette stage. He too suspects the relevance of Duranty’s stage, arguing that writers have not sufficiently acknowledged the “ubiquity and complex significance of dolls, puppets, and their derivatives at all levels of mid-nineteenth-century French society.”<sup>270</sup> For Kendall, Duranty and Degas’s interest in such items stemmed from a “shared commitment to...the observation of society at large along with a notably combative attitude toward the artistic establishment.”<sup>271</sup>

The thrust of my argument is different, if not oppositionally inclined. I argue that Duranty and Degas’s interest in the aesthetic of the puppet stemmed from their mutual interest in revitalizing the expressive conventions of naturalist art and theatre—to sustain, rather than disturb, the conventional notion of high art,

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<sup>268</sup> Translated in Vollard, *Degas*, 22.

<sup>269</sup> Meier-Graefe, *Degas*, 79.

<sup>270</sup> Kendall, *Degas and the Little Dancer*, 54.

<sup>271</sup> In particular, he finds that “dolls and puppets...make up one of the most underestimated factors” in the history of *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancers* (1879-1880) whose doll-like aesthetic, he argues, challenges conventional distinctions between “high” and “low” forms of art. Made of the materials of daily life, of ribbon and cotton, literalizes Duranty’s argument in *The New Painting* that “the very first idea was to eliminate the partition separating the artist’s studio from everyday life and to introduce the reality of the street.” *Ibid.*, 54-55.

rethinking, as it were, the potential for art to move an audience once the older means for doing so no longer did. That Degas drew on the aesthetic of dolls in less obvious ways than he did in his *Fourteen Year-Old Dancer*, and beyond the three-dimensional medium of sculpture—Meier-Graefe and Valéry sensed that same thrust in his paintings and drawings of dancers—helps us recognize that the aesthetic took part in a much broader problematic with which Degas was grappling, that is, the expression of the tragic. The appeal of the marionette theater for both Duranty in the 1860s and the Symbolists in the 1890s parallels Degas's own interest in the form, grappling as I think he was in both *The Steeplechase* and *Fallen Jockey* with the same set of questions but in pictorial terms.

The quality of the improbable and marvelous, the effect of stasis and of weightlessness, of bodies that float unbound by those pictorial rules for indicating gravitational pull, are some of the features of *The Fallen Jockey* that suggest the artificial world of the Symbolist's marionette stage. Suitably, in keeping with the reduced, iconic power of the marionette stage, the subject seems to be less about physical death—we see no wound—than the *idea* of death, less about a sporting accident than the existential drama of defeat and loss. “Paint not the thing, but the effect it produces,” Mallarmé wrote in 1864 when he was working out the terms of this new kind of suggestive art.<sup>272</sup> That Degas had not yet found the means to do

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<sup>272</sup> “J’invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d’une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en ces deux mots: Peindre, non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit.” Mallarmé,

so in that decade is suggested in the uncertain mood of *The Steeplechase*. Anatole France recognized the Mallarméan potential of the marionette theatre, which, while severed from its original religious function, still conveyed the affect of its narratives: “There is no one else today that can express religious sentiment as you can.”<sup>273</sup> The tragic symbolism of outstretched arms, and even the broken greens of Degas’s *Fallen Jockey*, intimate this awareness.<sup>274</sup>

One wonders, too, if for Degas the marionette theatre was weighted with loss of a more personal sort, as it was for the critic Claretie who could not help but nostalgically recall, when observing the contemporary stage, the earlier one of the 1860s. Claretie offers precisely the kind of personalized history that Degas’s *Fallen Jockey* elicits, the subject of the fourth and final chapter: the inward turn of the historical record.

I, who was born at the time your theater was created, I cannot but think without a little melancholy of all those actors that I have seen die. There is, in the charming gaiety that you mull over the beginnings and the vicissitudes of your scenes, an inevitable foundation of melancholy.<sup>275</sup>

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*Oeuvres complètes*, 307.

<sup>273</sup> “D’ailleurs il n’y a plus que vous aujourd’hui pour exprimer le sentiment religieux.” France, “Les Marionnettes de M. Signoret,” 9.

<sup>274</sup> Degas had been struck by the somber power of green. “Jamais je n’ai vu un vert si puissant et si sobre en même temps,” Degas wrote in 1860, when he visited the fortress Castello Sant’Elmo, in the medieval papal town overlooking Naples. “Je n’oublierai jamais ce...vert somber et puissant...” Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas*, 103.

<sup>275</sup> “Moi, qui ai vu naître votre théâtre, je ne puis songer sans un peu de mélancolie à tous ceux de vos acteurs que j’ai déjà vu mourir. Il y a, dans la gaieté charmante dont vous contez la fondation et les vicissitudes de votre scène, un fond inévitable de mélancolie.” Claretie in Lemercier de Neuville, *L’Histoire anecdotique des marionnettes modernes* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1892), vi.

## Chapter 4: A horse of a different color: Towards a new kind of public art

### 4.1 The tragic in daily life

Edmond Duranty and Maurice Maeterlinck's contributions to the avant-garde stage went well beyond their revival of the marionette theater. Their plays also took part in establishing a new kind of subject matter for modern drama, one that rejected grand subjects, dramatic actions, and overt didacticism. For both, the subject appropriate to modern drama was not the "violent, exceptional moment of life" (Maeterlinck), but the banal incidences of the quotidian.<sup>276</sup> "Embracing at the same time mystery and reality,"<sup>277</sup> was Duranty's description of his collection of plays for the *théâtre de Polichinelle*; for, in spite of its fantastic elements, the subject of his plays dealt with "simple, everyday life, with its incidents and commonplace accidents," centered on the lives of housewives and rural types.<sup>278</sup> Maeterlinck's influential essay, "The Tragic in Daily Life," of 1896, reflects the dramatic apogee of this shift in priorities in the latter half of the nineteenth century:

I have grown to believe that an old man, seated in his armchair, waiting patiently, with his lamp beside him; giving unconscious ear to all the

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<sup>276</sup> "Il ne s'agit plus d'un moment exceptionnel et violent de l'existence, mais de l'existence elle-même." Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles* (Paris: Société du mercure de France, 1902), 190.

<sup>277</sup> "Cela n'empêche pas cette collection de *Comédies* d'être le monument comique le plus complet qui ait été élevé au dix-neuvième siècle, embrassant à la fois le mystère et la réalité." Duranty, *Théâtre des marionnettes du jardin des tuileries*, 386. Translated in Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 473.

<sup>278</sup> Marcel Crouzet, *Un Méconnu du réalisme: Duranty (1833-1880): L'Homme, le critique, le romancier* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, 1964), 150, 152.

eternal laws that reign about his house...the silence of doors and windows and the quivering voice of the light, submitting with bent head to the presence of his soul and his destiny—an old man, who conceives not that all the powers of this world, like so many heedful servants, are mingling and keeping vigil in his room, who suspects not that the very sun itself is supporting in space the little table against which he leans, or that every star in heaven and every fiber of the soul are directly concerned in the movement of an eyelid that closes, or a thought that springs to birth—I have grown to believe that he, motionless as he is, does yet live in reality a deeper, more human, and more universal life than the lover who strangles his mistress, the captain who conquers in battle, or ‘the husband who avenges his honor.’<sup>279</sup>

In his earlier essay *The New Painting*, extending his theatrical interests to the pictorial arts, Duranty had similarly written against the histrionic, external action of traditional painting in favor of something more intimate, quiet and ordinary—and yet, equally grave: “*A man opens a door, he enters; that is enough: we see that he has lost his daughter.*”<sup>280</sup> Here, Duranty persuaded his readers to discern plot through subtle gestures and descriptive surfaces rather than through the

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<sup>279</sup> “Il m’est arrivé de croire qu’un vieillard assis dans son fauteuil, attendant simplement sous la lampe, écoutant sans le savoir toutes les lois éternelles qui règnent autour de sa maison, interprétant sans le comprendre ce qu’il y a dans le silence des portes et des fenêtres et dans la petite voix de la lumière, subissant la présence de son âme et de sa destinée, inclinant un peu la tête; sans se douter que toutes les puissances de ce monde interviennent et veillent dans la chambre comme des servantes attentives, ignorant que le soleil lui-même soutient au-dessus de l’abîme la petite table sur laquelle il s’accoude, et qu’il n’y a pas un astre du ciel ni une force de l’âme qui soient indifférents au mouvement d’une paupière qui retombe ou d’une pensée qui s’élève,— il m’est arrivé de croire que ce vieillard immobile vivait en réalité d’une vie plus profonde, plus humaine et plus générale que l’amant qui étrangle sa maîtresse, le capitaine qui remporte une victoire ou l’époux qui venge son honneur.” Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles*, 187-88.

<sup>280</sup> “*Un homme ouvre une porte, il entre, cela suffit: on voit qu’il a perdu sa fille!*” Duranty, *La Nouvelle peinture* (Paris: Éditions du Boucher, 2002), 20.



external, readable action of characters. For Maeterlinck, Mallarmé's essays on performance, which prioritized the expression of inner life over physical action, served as the basis for his own theatre of the mind: "The action, for instance, and the characters, evolve perfectly in the silences and the intervals between the scenes are as rich as the scenes themselves."<sup>281</sup> The lifelessness of the marionette suited this static, silent and suggestive theater. Maeterlinck describes "the august everyday life of a Hamlet, who has the time to live because he does not act" as the preferred kind of tragic hero.<sup>282</sup> (Mallarmé himself had earlier approvingly described Hamlet as a play about the tragic inevitability of stasis and paralysis.<sup>283</sup>)

Intimacy, quietness and the quotidian: these are all descriptive words that, in the context of our study, circle back on an old, now familiar term: *genre*, the form by which such words best expressed themselves in the pictorial arts. Degas's early "genre painting," as he referred to it, *The Interior* (1868-9) (**fig. 33**), itself a kind of theatrically-staged painting, is an instructive example of the pictorial equivalent to theater's turn away from the externalities of the traditional stage. Of some kind of mysterious confrontation between a man and woman in a dimly-lit bedroom, *The Interior* probingly replaces the formal devices of traditional history painting with more private qualities of genre, as Carol Armstrong has argued.

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<sup>281</sup> "L'action, par exemple, et les caractères se développent admirablement dans les silences; et les intervalles qu'il y a entre les scènes sont aussi féconds que les scènes elle-mêmes." Maeterlinck, *Annabella* (Paris: Olendorff, 1895), xv. Translated in McCormick, *Popular Puppet Theatre In Europe*, 45.

<sup>282</sup> "J'admire Othello, mais il ne me paraît pas vivre de l'auguste vie quotidienne d'un Hamlet, qui a le temps de vivre parce qu'il n'agit pas." Maeterlinck, *Le Trésor des humbles*, 187.

<sup>283</sup> See Mallarmé, "Hamlet" in *Oeuvres complètes*, 299-302.

Degas takes the “lacuna” at the heart of David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) and *The Lictors Returning the Bodies of His Sons to Brutus* (1789) (**fig. 34**), and adapts it to “an unknown text, given a neutral, uninformative title,” in “a resonating, twilit space rather than by an event or an action.”<sup>284</sup> The highly connotative rhetorical gestures of neoclassical history painting are “interrupted,” and indeed replaced by the “mutely descriptive surfaces and spaces of genre painting.”<sup>285</sup> Armstrong concludes: “In calling *The Interior* a genre painting, Degas surely meant to distinguish it”—by veiled quotation of history painting’s devices—“from the history painting with which he was still somewhat preoccupied.”<sup>286</sup> Taking part in the nineteenth-century’s shift towards the new kind of drama described by Duranty and Maeterlinck, Degas’s *Interior* literalizes the qualities that genre helped bring into focus, that is, the mentally and emotionally “interior,” elusive, and at times inscrutable aspects of being, so effectively foregrounded in subjects of everyday life.

While Armstrong rightly recognizes some sort of relationship between Degas’s *Interior* and history painting, she ultimately considers the relationship to be repudiary. I think, however, that *The Interior* instead reflects the depth of Degas’s awareness of the complex nature of the relationship between the two, that is, the subtlety with which history painting was transformed—not rejected—in the hands of genre. Suggestive of such, the “Davidian lacuna” and “brooding Roman

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<sup>284</sup> Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, 98.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

glare”<sup>287</sup> of *The Interior* may represent less a rejection of Davidian neoclassicism than an acceptance or, at least, an attempt to come to terms with its nineteenth-century interpreters; which in this instance may have been Gérôme’s turn towards historical genre as it took shape in the empty, stage-like space and “brooding Roman glare” of the senator in his famous *Caesar*. If in the 1860s Degas was thinking seriously about just these kinds of reinventions of history painting, then again in the 1890s, in a period of increasing demand for the revival of an ambitious kind of public art, we find Degas again deeply engaged with the contemporary question of how a history painting might function in the modern era, reprising and reworking one last time the large-scale, open-air figure composition surely meant to recall the grand tradition.

## 4.2 Genre and the inward turn of history painting

In his seminal scholarship on historical genre painting in the Salons of the first half of the nineteenth century, Stephen Bann illustrates how the intensified interest in the more interior aspects of being affected even the representation of history’s grand subjects and events—as Gérôme’s *Caesar* came to exemplify in its absence of all external dramatization. After visiting the Salon of 1810, the Director of Fine Arts, Dominique Vivant-Denon, wrote of this new kind of historical painting in a letter to the Emperor: “It’s anecdotal history, or the representation of characters whose historical lives make us want to get close to

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<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

them...and to know their private life.”<sup>288</sup> While Vivant-Denon was referring specifically to Troubador painting—small-scale, genre paintings of minor incidents of daily life, such as Napoleon warming his hands by the fire—the unprecedented popularity of these images attests to the changing historiographic sensibility of the period, the “turning of history’s major happenings into the private poetry of its personages.”<sup>289</sup> The most ambitious historical paintings of the century, including those of Gros, Vernet, Delaroche and Meissonier, reflect this inward turn of historical representation, enabled by the infiltration of genre into the arena of Napoleonic conquest.<sup>290</sup>

Bann and, more recently, David O’Brien and Nicholas Prendergast have looked to Gros as the archetypal artist of the nineteenth century in marking this transformation of historical representation.<sup>291</sup> His Napoleonic history painting

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<sup>288</sup> “Une des choses très remarquables dans l’Exposition de cette année, Sire; c’est la multiplicité de Tableaux d’un genre qui appartient particulièrement à l’École française par sa délicatesse et son instruction. C’est l’histoire anecdotale ou la représentation de personnages dont la vie historique fait désirer de s’approcher, pour ainsi dire, d’eux et de connaître leur vie privée, genre qu’on pourrait appeler la Comédie noble ou le Drame de la peinture.” Jean Chatelain, *Dominique Vivant Denon* (Paris: Perrin, 1973), 330. Translated in Christopher Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting: Antoine-Jean Gros's La Bataille d'Eylau* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73-4.

<sup>289</sup> As Derin Tanyol, a student of Bann, has phrased it. Tanyol, “*Histoire anecdotique* – the people’s history? Gros and Delaroche,” *Word and Image* 16.1 (January-March 2000): 19.

<sup>290</sup> See for instance: Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995); Bann, *The Clothing of Clío: A Study of the Representation of History in Nineteenth-Century Britain and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Bann, *Paul Delaroche*; Francis Haskell, “The Manufacture of the Past in Nineteenth-Century Painting” in *Past and Present in Art and Taste* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987); Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting*; Siegfried, “Naked History,” 235-258; Beth S. Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration: Abandoned by the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and the special issue devoted to the subject of historical representation in *Word & Image* 16.1 (January-March 2000).

<sup>291</sup> O’Brien, *After the Revolution: Antoine-Jean Gros, Painting, and Propaganda Under Napoleon* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

displaced David's. If David's paintings spotlight a decisive and singularly important historical moment with an instructive intent, Gros's depiction of more minor and anecdotal moments directs attention to an essential humanness of his historical subjects.<sup>292</sup> To this end, in his *Battle of Nazareth* (1801), a painting made up of various anecdotal vignettes of graphic violence, Gros foregrounds the facial expressions of his victims, personalizing subjects who, in older representations of battles, would have remained anonymous. Gros's envisioning of war departs from the famous precedents of Louis-François Lejeune, for instance, whose panoramic, near-cartographic landscapes dotted with soldiers recorded less the human experience of war than its topographical distribution. (Hence the critic Pierre Chaussard's characterization of Lejeune's achievement: "M. Le Jeune was first to have had the sense to combine the plants and vegetation of a climate so that we might recognize it."<sup>293</sup>) In Gros's *Napoleon on the Bridge at Arcola* (1796-7) the Emperor's pained expression, dramatically foregrounded, elicits the viewer's identification. Consequently, Chaussard characterized Gros as an artist whose history paintings constituted a sort of portraiture: "The history painter has shown great portrait paintings and national portraits."<sup>294</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Prendergast describes the anecdote, for which Gros was famous, as the "carrier of the 'private' into the sphere of history painting." Prendergast, *Napoleon and History Painting*, 73.

<sup>293</sup> "M. Le Jeune a senti le premier combine les plantes et la végétation d'un climat aident à le faire reconnaître." Chaussard, *Le Pausanias français ou description du salon de 1806* (Paris: F. Buisson, 1806), 219. Said in reference to the painter's *Bataille des Pyramides* (1806).

<sup>294</sup> "Le Peintre d'Histoire s'est montré grand Peintre de Portraits, et de Portraits nationaux." Chaussard, *Salon de 1806*, 77. Said in reference to Gros's *Battle of Aboukir* (1806).

The Napoleonic battle scenes of Delaroche and Vernet reflect Gros's continuing influence under the July Monarchy. In Delaroche's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, unlike David's abstract and heroicized version of the event, the emphasis is on how Napoleon felt—a tired spirit, dejected, cold-stung by winter air—as opposed to what he did. Bann keenly describes Delaroche's portrait, *Napoleon in his Study* (1838), as another antithesis to the Davidian approach. Apparently about “the inwardness of reflective thought” Delaroche's version of the Emperor is imbued with “a dimension of interiority which is hardly present in the competent bureaucrat of David's portrait.”<sup>295</sup>

Vernet's paintings showcase some of the new pictorial strategies of the period aimed towards this more affective mode of historical representation, whose devices included, especially, the foregrounding of individual figures within a shallow space—a compositional technique that Gros had mastered. As if literalizing Vivant-Denon's ambition “to get close” to these historical figures, in all three of the paintings commissioned for the Galerie des Batailles and exhibited at the Salon of 1836—*The Battle of Jenna, Friedland* and *Wagram*—Vernet featured a sharply-silhouetted Napoleon front and center, whose ascendant presence is intensified by a low horizon and foreground rise. The same is true of *Soldier on the Field of Battle* (1818) in which an almost life-size wounded grenadier of Napoleon's Imperial Guard mourns his fallen comrades after the defeat at Waterloo. The upward sloping darkened landscape behind him forcibly

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<sup>295</sup> Bann, *Paul Delaroche*, 253, 248.

foregrounds his presence. Depicting not the battle itself but its aftermath—in the distance we can make out a wooden cross and the outstretched limbs of fallen soldiers and horses—Vernet’s concern is less to do with the historical fact or conventional glorification of heroism, than with a mood of defeat and loss. He recounts instead a kind of personalized history, one inscribed on the face of the lone soldier bereft of his companions in arms.

In keeping with a history that solicits empathic communion as opposed to distanced reflection, Vernet and Delaroche’s treatments of their subjects also “sought to excite the free play of thought and interpretation,” as Bann writes; indeed, that effect was something the artists of historical genre deliberately intended.<sup>296</sup> In choosing, for instance, not the climactic events and “colossal actions” of battle, but the more mundane moments drawn from the *Bulletin de la Grande Armée*—a common soldier’s salute to Napoleon at the Battle of Jena—Vernet and Delaroche’s paintings encouraged viewers to reconstruct the more complete historical scenario. A critic wrote of Vernet’s paintings for the *Galerie des Batailles*:

In a word, this is not one of those heroic newsletters written for posterity by the Emperor on the battlefield, which in a few lines summarizes its gigantic actions. It is an anecdote written in a corner by an officer, the totality [of events] having escaped him.<sup>297</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> “This, I would argue, is the conscious intention of the practitioners of historical genre.” Bann, “Editorial: The Image of History,” 2.

<sup>297</sup> “En un mot, ce n’est pas un de ces héroïques bulletins écrits pour la postérité par l’empereur sur le champ de bataille, et résumant en quelques lignes ses gigantesques actions; c’est une

This was true of historical paintings beyond Napoleonic subject matter. In reference to Delaroche's *Cromwell*, in 1839, Prosper Mérimée observed that the painting forced its viewers to imaginatively recreate the scene, with a subject as intractable as Cromwell.<sup>298</sup>

Today one calls a subject well chosen if it makes the spectator's imagination travel through the entire series of events that preceded or followed the one before his eyes. This is an entire drama that is related to him, not an individual scene, complete in itself.... Only then each spectator can begin to enter into Cromwell's meditation and endeavor to decipher that obscure character.<sup>299</sup>

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anecdote écrite dans un coin par un officier auquel l'ensemble a échappé." "Salon de 1836, 2e article," *L'Artiste* 11 (1836): 78-9.

<sup>298</sup> Compositionally, Bann illustrates how in both Delaroche's *Assassination of the Duc de Guise* and Gérôme's *Death of Caesar* the artists have organized their paintings in such a way as to invite the viewer's projection. "Both Delaroche and Gérôme articulate the position of the dead body, and the movements of those reacting to it, within an overall panoramic space whose centre is left empty. The eye takes in the two complementary focuses of attention, and the interpretive instinct seizes the narrative connection between them, but in spatial terms these two operations take place around a void." Bann cites Wolfgang Kemp's important essay on Gérôme's *Death of Marshal Ney*, a painting that shows the abandoned, dead hero lying on an empty street. Kemp writes that "the artist is no longer the fabricator of solid data and relations; instead he arranges spaces and surfaces, which are open to the projective activity of the beholder" ("Death at Work: A Case Study on Constitutive Blanks in Nineteenth-Century Painting," *Representations* 10 (Spring 1985): 114). Bann elaborates: "What he [Kemp] calls the 'constitutive blank' in *Marshal Ney* functions in such a way as to offer the spectator a new, and no longer didactic, type of guidance." *Paul Delaroche*, 196. This kind of spatial lacuna is a feature that Degas's *Interior* also draws on, as noted earlier.

<sup>299</sup> "Aujourd'hui, on appelle un sujet heureux, celui qui fait voyager l'imagination du spectateur sur toute la série des événements qui ont précédé ou qui suivent celui qu'on met sous ses yeux. C'est un drame tout entière qu'on lui raconte, non une scène détachée et complète.... S'emparant de la plus suspecte de toutes les anecdotes, il [Delaroche] représente Cromwell contemplant le cadaver de Charles Ier, et en *disant*: 'Cet homme était bien constitué et devrait vivre long-temps.' Or, je le demande à M. Delaroche, avec tout son talent peut-il exprimer ces paroles? Cependant tout le monde s'arrête devant ce tableau, tout le monde l'admire. Oui, après avoir lu le livret, et seulement *alors* chacun se met à suivre la pensée de Cromwell; on tente de pénétrer ce caractère indéchiffrable." "Le Salon de 1839," *Revue des deux mondes*, 4<sup>th</sup> ser., 18 (1 April 1839): 88-9. Translated in Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration*, 119.



For Horace de Viel-Castel the absorptive effect of this painting was powerful: a viewer who gave himself over to it could be held “for hours on end.”<sup>300</sup> This was also the case with Delaroche’s *Execution of Lady Jane Grey* (1833), which did not depict any precise textual moment, thereby opening itself entirely to the imaginative skills of its viewers to fictionalize, producing empathetic narratives of the inner life of its tragic heroine.

Even Meissonier, famous for his erudition in all aspects of the historical events he depicted, was above all interested in the more human, interior processes that guided them. Offering neither an image of “the actual battle” or information pertaining to “the exact date of the campaign of France,” Meissonier’s *1814* indicates instead the range of thoughts and feelings of the Emperor and his soldiers in response to the Grand Army’s melancholy retreat from Moscow through the wintry countryside.<sup>301</sup>

The Emperor, full of thought, senses that behind him those who accompany him no longer have the same confidence...they doubt...Ah! If they did not doubt, everything might still be redeemed...he senses that he alone is indomitable...he alone does not doubt...he turns over in his head the combinations that could still assure safety...and he senses that he is alone...everything is sad and poignant.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> “Placé dans le grand salon carré près de la porte d’entrée, arrête tout d’abord le public, qui reste silencieux des heures entières, étonné des idées profondes et mélancoliques que ce tableau fait naître en lui.” Viel-Castel, “*Cromwell* par M. Delaroche,” *L’Artiste* 1 (1831): 269.

<sup>301</sup> “S’il avait fallu déterminer la bataille, ou seulement le jour de la campagne de France, j’étais prisonnier de mon sujet.” Gréard, *Jean-Louis-Ernest Meissonier*, 227.

<sup>302</sup> “L’Empereur, plein de pensées, sent que derrière lui, ceux qui l’accompagnent n’ont plus la même confiance... Ils doutent... Ah! s’ils ne doutaient pas, tout pourrait peut-être se réparer...il

The Emperor's meticulously-rendered facial expression signals his ambivalent condition. Eschewing any specific moment that might be traceable to a text, Meissonier permits his viewers to feel their way into the scene, to sense the general mood supported by pathetic fallacy, by the affective pallor of the muddled brown and greys of winter snow. The small genre-like scale of the figures in the painting, which is in size a mere twenty by thirty inches, supports this kind of close-up, experiential and intimate viewing, as Derin Tanyol explains it: "The nineteenth-century shrinkage of history painting, in narrative and ultimately in size (examples being Troubadour painting, Napoleonic genre, Delaroche's student Gérôme, or Meissonier), can be linked to its 'privatization'—the belief that history was best told when presented from the inside out."<sup>303</sup>

I think that Degas's *Fallen Jockey* finds its proper place within this evolving trajectory of historical representation in which the imaginative response of its viewers became as significant as external historical circumstances. If we see no history here it may well be because Degas shows the extent of genre's reformatory power in the realm of historical image-making. In François Pupil's seminal definition of *genre historique* "the historical pretext becomes so anecdotal that it approaches genre."<sup>304</sup> This is to say that if Degas's *Steeplechase* had

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sent qu'il est seul indomptable...lui seul ne doute pas...il roule dans sa tête les combinaisons qui pourraient encore assurer le salut...et il sent qu'il est seul...tout est triste et poignant." Ibid., 226.

<sup>303</sup> Tanyol, "'Histoire anecdotique'—the people's history?," 29.

<sup>304</sup> "Pour les artistes troubadour, le sujet d'histoire est à peine différent de la scène de genre et l'équivoque se renforce quand le prétexte historique devient si anecdotique qu'il approche du

commented on the merging of genre and history, then about thirty years later *The Fallen Jockey* proposes what the endpoint of their merging looks like: *history painting without history*.

The first critics of *genre historique* seem to have foreseen this end. Of Vernet's battle paintings at the Salon of 1836, Alfred de Musset had succinctly complained: "These are not battles first of all because no one battles in them."<sup>305</sup> Victor de Nouvion similarly criticized: "One can shift around indiscriminately the titles of *Jena*, *Friedland*, and *Wagram* without causing historical truth to suffer any noticeable damage."<sup>306</sup> Degas can be seen as pictorializing the sentiment that informs such criticism, capitalizing precisely on the sense that the new painting was simply not historical enough.

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genre." François Pupil, *Le Style troubadour, ou la nostalgie du bon vieux temps* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1985), 17.

<sup>305</sup> "On voit, d'après ce que je viens de dire, que je ne m'appliquerai point à un examen approfondi des quatre *Batailles* que j'ai nommées plus haut. Il me suffira de les citer et de remarquer que ce qu'on y peut trouver de plus blâmable, c'est le titre qu'on leur a donné; car ce ne sont pas des batailles, d'abord parce qu'on ne s'y bat point, et on ne pouvait pas s'y battre, puisque l'Empereur est là en personne." Musset, "Le Salon de 1836," *Revue des deux mondes* (15 April 1836): 158. Translated in Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe*, 167, note 149.

<sup>306</sup> "On donnera une idée juste et entière de ses trois tableaux d'*Iéna*, de *Friedland* et de *Wagram* en disant que ce sont trois portraits équestres de l'empereur, vu par devant, par derrière et de profil, et autour desquels on a groupé quelques attirails de guerre, et quelques officiers d'état-major recevant et distribuant ses ordres, comme attributs indispensables d'un grand guerrier. Au reste, on peut sans inconvénient transporter indifféremment de l'un à l'autre les titres d'*Iéna*, de *Friedland* ou de *Wagram*, sans que la vérité historique aît en rien à en souffrir; car l'artiste a pris à tâche de choisir, dans ces trois célèbres campagnes, les événements les plus communs et les plus décolorés." Nouvion, "Salon de 1836," *La France littéraire* 24 (15 April 1836): 296. Translated in Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe*, 168. That same year, Charles-François Farcy echoed the sentiment of his peers: "Les trois soi-disant batailles, d'*Iéna*, de *Friedland* et de *Wagram*, par M. Horace Vernet, sont trois nouvelles preuves de la facilité et de la rapidité d'exécution du fa presto moderne: mais c'est tout. Il nous semble, au surplus, que lorsque de tels tableaux demandés à M. Horace Vernet sont payés un prix beaucoup plus élevé qu'à ses confrères, il devrait épargner un peu moins les frais de composition. Ses trois batailles sont dans le livret, mais point sur la toile. Je ne vois que trois groupes où Napoléon figure avec son cheval, et le reste n'est rien ou n'est que peu de chose." "Exposition de 1836," *Journal des artistes* 1.11 (March 1836): 165.

Without a discernable narrative or details of time and place, Degas effectively solicits the same, inwardly-searching spectator of the kind that historical genre conditioned. *The Fallen Jockey* calls upon the rhetorical devices of traditional history painting—its declarative gestures of splayed legs and outstretched arms, of the horse’s dramatic stare; yet they are no longer in the service of a historical narrative such as that of David’s brothers in arms bonded by oath. The ideal viewer thus seems to be the one who stands before the painting in search of the several possibilities that suggest themselves, turning pictorial matter into the stuff of poetry and prose and giving himself over to it as, say, Viel-Castel did before Delaroche’s *Cromwell*. “Each is contemplating his own thoughts,” Prosper Mérimée concluded his review of Delaroche’s painting, recognizing that this new kind of painting, which itself favored the private man of the interior as opposed to the public man of history, encouraged its viewers to reflect on their own mental drama as they reconstructed the scene and its meaning.<sup>307</sup> Mérimée’s observation is equally applicable to Delaroche’s portrait of the emperor in his study, stripped of his battle uniform and turned inward on his own thoughts, engaging the viewer’s construction of and reflection upon mental dramas. In *The Fallen Jockey* the low horizon and foreground rise, the large and emphatically foregrounded figures—some of the techniques refined by the artists of historical genre—encourage this experiential mode of spectatorship.

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<sup>307</sup> “On s’arrête long-temps, sans doute, mais regarde-t-on toujours le tableau? Non, chacun regarde sa propre pensée.” Mérimée, “Salon de 1839,” 89. Translated in Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration*, 119.

### 4.3 A poem

“In May and again in August 2005,” Michael Fried recollects, “I stood for hours in Basel Kunstmuseum giving myself over to Degas’s tragic masterpiece (for that is what I believe it to be).”<sup>308</sup> Fried’s prose-poem—a departure from the standard form of art historical scholarship and the impetus behind this study—marks the first real attempt to interpret Degas’s *Fallen Jockey*, to identify the source of its power and poignancy.<sup>309</sup> Feeling his way into the painting, Fried’s first-person analysis exemplifies the shift towards the experiential or interiorized mode of viewing that historical genre helped inaugurate.

A large canvas, nearly square, in fact vertical in format. In the upper third, a slender dark-brown horse with a plaited mane running headlong, also slightly downward, from right to left with front and rear legs counterfactually extended so as to arrest it forever in mid-stride. Carrying an empty racing saddle, reins hanging loose, the one visible stirrup swinging backward, indicating speed. And beneath the horse, floating on his back upon or just above soft green billows (a hillside: the race is a steeplechase, though no obstacle is shown), a fallen jockey in a white

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<sup>308</sup> Fried, “The Fallen Jockey,” *The Threepenny Review* 108 (Winter 2007): 28.

<sup>309</sup> With the exception of Jean Sutherland Boggs’s analysis in which she proposes that the fallen jockey might represent Degas’s brother who had died a few years earlier. “In 1893 Achille De Gas, who had probably posed for the early fallen jockey, died in Paris. Degas was sentimentally if realistically affected by his death, and he might have thought the first painting an appropriate memorial to that unhappy brother.” Boggs, *Degas at the Races*, 161. That Achille De Gas posed for the original jockey was first suggested by Paul-André Lemoisne who noted the resemblance between one of Degas’s preparatory drawings of the jockey and Achille’s features, notably his goatee and sideburns. See Lemoisne, *Degas et son oeuvre*, 40.

silk shirt buttoned to the neck, yellow riding tights, and black stub-heeled boots rising to below his knees. At the top of the canvas a glimpse of sky and clouds (low-hanging, moiling) and in the sunlit distance, barely more than touches of pigment, a line of horses racing as if in another world.

The picture is unfinished. Nothing in it feels resolved, and especially toward the bottom the scumbled strokes of green grow sparse and the buff underpainting shows through. Degas scholars are confident that he worked on it in the 1890s, but beyond that they know only that it amounts to a variation on a more elaborate failed painting of thirty years earlier, which itself was a response to his friend and rival Edouard Manet's *Incident in a Bullring*, with its fallen torero who may or may not be merely pretending to be dead (no visible wound and only a small trickle of blood on the ground). But Degas's rider appears genuinely stricken: there is something horrific - I don't think I exaggerate - about his doll-like posture, halfway elevated arms, and head with its closed eyes, uncertain color, and air of deathlike rigidity. In May and again in August 2005 I stood for hours in Basel Kunstmuseum giving myself over to Degas's tragic masterpiece (for that is what I believe it to be). In the end I arrived at the following conviction:

The jockey is Manet. Who had died in his early fifties as a result of complications from syphilis more than ten years

before. Leaving Degas bereft of a dauntless companion in arms whose pictorial genius he unstintingly admired and whose absolute social confidence he could never hope to emulate (“cet animal,” he once called him). Not that Degas had the least suspicion that this was the meaning of his picture-and indeed the jockey with his unappealing mug and too-vigorous thatch and beard doesn’t resemble Manet, whose features expressed the most refined intelligence and whose hair, receding above his forehead, and elegant short beard were reddish-blond, not black. But that Degas’s protagonist wears a beard at all has always inspired comment, and then there are two other observations that are perhaps decisive in view of the dreamlike atmosphere of the composition as a whole. First, Manet died in convulsions ten days after having had his gangrenous left leg amputated: the jockey’s awkwardly bent, one assumes broken left leg recalls that terrible fact. And second, the jockey’s right hand-Manet’s painting hand-is almost wholly absent. (So how could the jockey represent the great painter? Impossible, Degas’s unconscious must have thought.) But on a line from the jockey’s right arm, mostly superimposed against the horse’s body, is his not yet fallen riding crop, which I see-how could I not? - as a substitute for the fallen painter’s brush. And the headlong riderless horse with its innocent head turned slightly toward the viewer and its large dark eye full of unspecified emotion? Several possibilities suggest themselves: modern painting, Manet’s immortality, blind chance, life itself...

Fried's analysis not only registers for our purposes the kind of spectator suited to the new kind of ambitious painting (one who works hard to discern meaning in the absence of explicit dramatization), but also, in determining the subject of Degas's painting to be about loss—*both* (art) historical and personal, and perhaps slanted toward the latter—Fried's analysis registers the new kind of tragedy suited to it: one drawn from the personal and private circumstances of life (as Duranty and Maeterlinck understood it). This is to say: *The Fallen Jockey* befits the kind of tragedy that the inward turn of historical painting seemed to necessitate.

#### 4.4 Art and politics

The renewed interest in the art of the grand tradition during the *fin-de-siècle* was marked by the allied ambition of reviving a kind of civic art commensurate with the ideal upon which it was founded. In a period of extreme self-consciousness regarding definitions of France and Frenchness,<sup>310</sup> the ambition seemed best realized in the art of Puvis de Chavannes, widely considered France's greatest national painter of the age, succeeding Meissonier in 1891 as president of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts. Puvis's life-size murals at once breathed new life into the great French tradition of public decoration and offered an idyllic

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<sup>310</sup> This is a subject well covered in the art historical scholarship. To cite but a few, general studies on politics and society at the turn of the century in France: R.D. Anderson, *France, 1870-1914: Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1977); Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madelaine Reberieux, *The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War, 1871-1914*, trans. J.R. Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Eugen Weber, *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).



vision of France as an eternal and unified motherland (**fig. 35**).<sup>311</sup> Not surprisingly, state officials of the Third Republic granted Puvis the prized commissions of the Panthéon, the Sorbonne and The Hôtel de Ville whose walls he decorated with static figures in pastoral landscapes engaged in quiet ritual as befit an art of civic order. In 1896, at the height of Puvis's popularity, the Louvre staged a one-man exhibition featuring hundreds of his drawings. The most notable critics of the period praised the exhibition in terms that speak of the revived spirit of the traditional values that characterized Charles Blanc's *Grammaire*. Gustave Geffroy, for instance, wrote that Puvis's art represented an ideal of civic art, an art removed from the incidentals of daily life, an art of the fully resolved *tableau*:

It's good to present men with harmonious images...these beautiful compositions, these grand visions, born of an inspired mind....His work is a place of rest where thought is freed from the mediocre incidents of the everyday, and goes toward the essential."<sup>312</sup>

Alphonse Germain cited Blanc directly in his praise of Puvis whom he promoted as the figure-head of a renewed national style and whose art he thought part of a

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<sup>311</sup> At least this is how critics wanted to see it. Jennifer Shaw writes of Puvis's decorative mural *Summer* (1892), part of a larger decorative scheme for the Hotel de Ville: "The often overdetermined critical rhetoric used to describe the mural demonstrates how badly the critics wanted to see in *Summer* a vision of France as a plentiful land without dissonance of any kind." Shaw, *Dream States: Puvis de Chavannes, Modernism, and the Fantasy of France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 158.

<sup>312</sup> "Il est bon de présenter aux hommes des images harmonieuses...ces belles ordonnances, ces grandes visions, nées de la fièvre d'un cerveau....Son oeuvre est un lieu de bon repos où la pensée se dégage des médiocres incidents de l'au jour le jour, et va vers l'essentiel." Geffroy, "Une Oeuvre décorative: Puvis de Chavannes," *La Revue socialiste* 21 (March 1895): 278-79. Translated in Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 216.

continuing pictorial lineage extending back to Giotto's frescoes and Poussin's *tableaux*.

Art follows an ascending course like humanity. Courage, then, hardy precursors of the renaissance, Corot and Millet are your forbearers. You are on the right path; you walk there with the exuberance of youth and its unavoidable errors, but from your ranks will come the one who will find a way to put the splash of Monet into the lines of Poussin.<sup>313</sup>

While Germain and Geffroy's politics differed—Catholic conservative versus secular anarchist—both championed a kind of Blanc-inspired vision of civic art, an art of tradition and equilibrium to equal that of the past.

Informed by the example of Puvis, many of the decorative murals and large paintings of the vanguard of the 1890s similarly aimed to reprise a new kind of public art in which the ideals of classicism, nationalism and modernism converged. As it has been discussed, Symbolists like Bonnard, Denis and Vuillard who rejected small-scale genre painting and its materialist underpinnings, spoke of a renewed commitment to an art of the *tableau*, to a more enduring and definitive kind of painting than the one impressionism seemed to offer. The statuesque peasants of neo-impressionists like Paul Signac and Camille Pissarro took up the challenge that Poussin, then Corot and Millet, had confronted, that of large-scale,

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<sup>313</sup> Germain was writing in reference to Georges Seurat's *La Grande Jatte* (1884-6). "L'art suit une marche ascendante comme l'humanité. Courage donc, hardis précurseurs de la renaissance, Corot et Millet son vos aïeux, vous êtes dans la bonne voie, vous y marchez avec l'exubérance de la jeunesse et ses erreurs inévitables, mais de vos rangs sortira celui qui saura mettre la tache de Monet dans les lignes de Poussin." Germain, "Impressionistes à l'exposition de la société des artistes indépendants," *Le Coup de feu* 14 (October 1886): 20-1. Translated in Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde*, 206.

open-air figure compositions in the manner of the “grand tradition.” While their art appealed to individual subjectivity and fantasy, they nevertheless upheld the aim of public edification.<sup>314</sup> Born of anarchist politics, these images of peasant life offered a vision of a unified France freed from the strain of industrialized society, of man at harmony with each other and the land. In their size and subject, these images were not intended either for the exhibition space or for the domestic interior, those private, even hermetic worlds that impressionist art seemed to cultivate. Likewise, the obsessively systematic pointillist technique developed by Seurat, then addressed by Signac and Pissarro, sought to replace the privatized aesthetic of impressionist brushwork, replacing perceptibly individual gestures with an ostensibly more uniform, systematized technique.

We know that Degas was as deeply invested in the future of France as were his artistic contemporaries. During the 1890s, his sense of nationalism became a driving force: “What interests me personally is work, business, and the army,” he told Daniel Halévy.<sup>315</sup> In the “grand, extraordinarily eloquent discourses on the French nation,” which Daniel Halévy, who was their sounding board during long photographic sessions, describes, Degas spoke excitedly of his fascination with

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<sup>314</sup> Katherine Kuenzli explores the ways Bonnard, Vuillard and Denis sought “fresh forms of collectivity” in order to lay “the groundwork for a new public culture” (7). Bonnard, she writes, attempted “to create a democratic art by harnessing popular idioms and subject matter” (2). Vuillard aimed to make “the subconscious intuition awakened through aesthetic experience the basis of an experience of collective consciousness.” For the religious-minded Denis, it was his “his belief that the spiritual perfection of individuals through painting could lead to renewed public ideals.” Kuenzli, *The Anti-Heroism of Modern Life: Symbolist Decoration and the Problem of Privacy in the Fin-de-Siècle* (Diss. UC Berkeley, 2002).

<sup>315</sup> “Ce qui m’intéresse, moi, c’est le travail, c’est le commerce, c’est l’armée!” Halévy, *Degas parle*, 94.

soldiers, war, and Napoleonic legend.<sup>316</sup> On January 2, 1896, Degas sat spellbound at the Halévy home on the Rue de Douai captivated by General Philippe Duhesme's first-hand recollections of the cavalry charge at Gravelotte during the Franco-Prussian war, the events of which Ludovic's *L'Invasion* had popularized. Recording in his diary one of Degas's monologues of December 22, 1895, Halévy tells us of the invisible line the artist drew between art and politics: "He talked about France, about photography, about photography, about France, the whole confounded in the same exaltation."<sup>317</sup> Valéry, too, tells of how Degas's patriotism effortlessly aligned with his feeling for art in these years. Of Delacroix's *Saint Louis Winning the Battle of Taillebourg* (1837), a vast painting that hung in the Galerie des Batailles, in which the French king batters the skulls of English knights from atop a rearing charger, Degas pronounced: "The blue of Saint Louis's mantle is France."<sup>318</sup>

Degas's conservative politics—which intensified during the peak years of the Dreyfus Affair from 1896-1898—have been well chronicled in the scholarship. Yet, there is scant analysis of the ways political circumstances might have influenced his art.<sup>319</sup> An apparent scholarly resistance to identifying a point of

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<sup>316</sup> "Degas interrompait par de grands discours sur la France, d'une éloquence extraordinaire." Ibid., 87.

<sup>317</sup> "Il parlait de la France, de photographie, de photographie, de la France, le tout confondu dans une même exaltation." Ibid.

<sup>318</sup> "Le bleu du manteau de Saint-Louis est France." Valéry, *Degas danse dessin*, 158.

<sup>319</sup> This is not exclusive to Degas. "Existing scholarship details the political positions adopted by individual artists, but does not investigate the Affair's effects on individual artist's painterly practices," Katherine Kuenzli writes in reference to the art of the major Symbolists. In light of the fact that "the Affair posed a greater threat to this group of artists...than to any other artistic group

connection between Degas's art and "The Affair," in particular, is paradoxically evident even among those scholars who approach the subject head on. For instance, in her article "Degas and the Dreyfus Affair," Linda Nochlin asks: "What effect did Degas's anti-Semitism have on his art?" She answers: "Little or none."<sup>320</sup> Carol Armstrong is only slightly more diffident on the subject.

I have not addressed this [anti-Semitism] because, while it is just as complicated a story as Degas's misogyny (it is true that Degas was vituperatively anti-Jewish, especially during and after the Dreyfus affair, but it is also true that some of his closest friends were Jews), it has even less to do with his imagery—with the possible exception of the *Stock-Exchange* (and the images related to it), whose dark, slovenly depiction of moneylenders might certainly be inflected with antisemitic racism.<sup>321</sup>

Armstrong's approach, while more nuanced than Nochlin's, still seems hesitant with respect to any explicit linking of Degas's art and anti-Semitism.

Of course *The Fallen Jockey* does not represent Degas's politics or historical circumstances; in fact, for reasons discussed earlier, it does not represent history at all. Yet I do believe that the painting figures the loss of an imagined

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in the 1890s," she understands Maurice Denis's "Homage to Cezanne" (1900) as the artist's "effort to shore up group identity in a moment of crisis" in "the hope that members of his group could resolve their differences based on the work of Cezanne." Kuenzli, "Aesthetics and Cultural Politics in the Age of Dreyfus: Maurice Denis's *Homage to Cézanne*," *Art History* 5.30 (November 2007), 707, 686, 687, 705.

<sup>320</sup> Nochlin further writes that one makes a "ludicrous error" if "one decides it is impossible to look at his images in the same way once one knows about his politics, feeling that his anti-Semitism somehow pollutes his pictures, seeping into them in some ineffable way and changing their meaning, their very existence as a signifying system." "Degas and The Dreyfus Affair: A Portrait of the Artist as an Anti-Semite" in *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, and Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 109, 112.

<sup>321</sup> Armstrong, *Odd Man Out*, 282.

collectivity that the Dreyfus Affair made painfully clear. As the nation splintered into various factions following a series of national crises—the Boulanger debacle (1889), the Panama Canal Scandal (1892), the anarchist bombings that led to the assassination of President Sadi Carnot (1894), and, finally, and above all, the Dreyfus Affair—the existence of a unified public consciousness lost legitimacy. In the aftermath of the arrest and humiliation of Dreyfus in the winter days of January 1895 there was a dismantling of the consensus upon which the viability of civic art depended, a profound rift in assumptions about identity, face and nation. In the courtyard of the École Militaire, on the Champ-de-Mars, the ceremony that stripped Dreyfus of his uniform and of the red stripes, epaulet and insignia medals of rank, also stripped the country of the semblance of a national, collective consciousness of the sort Puvis's art imagined for itself and to whom his art imagined it spoke.

Arguably, *The Fallen Jockey* invokes the aesthetic of Puvis's murals at precisely the moment of his most famous public commissions—in its decorative flatness, sensation of stasis, and stark stretch of land inhabited by floating forms. But, as if in pointed refutation of his art, the sensation of silence that we experience when standing before Degas's painting, that “air of death-like rigidity,” as Fried describes it, rebuts the possibility of a generalized, symbolic and communicative art of the sort Puvis hoped to reprise. In the absence of narrative the rhetorical devices of an older art are emptied of the suggestion of sound. The

quiet of *The Fallen Jockey*, like a suspension of time in a state of shock, is of a different sort than the resolved golden age calm in Puvis's.

In silencing the large, open-air figure composition once meant for the civic site or crowded halls of the Salon, as its own earlier incarnation *The Steeplechase* itself was, *The Fallen Jockey* is arguably the culmination of historical painting's inward turn. More broadly, it heralds the end of a process that had begun four decades earlier, in the 1860s, when artists abandoned the official public Salon for the gallery or private exhibition. Looking back at this trajectory of French modernism, Meier-Graefe was rueful about this shift: "One sought freedom for art, but freedom from what? One forgot that freedom leads to isolation."<sup>322</sup> A century earlier, Prosper Mérimée himself seemed to have sensed modernity's tragic underbelly when he assessed the kind of painting that played a pivotal role in the privatization of the most public art. It is hard not to read a note of pessimism in his final analysis of the solipsistic effect of Delaroche's *Cromwell*: "Yes, without a doubt, the spectators remain there, but are they looking at the painting?" He answered: "No, each is contemplating his own thoughts."<sup>323</sup>

For Degas, the loss of an audience with whom to speak was at once both (art) historical and profoundly personal, the twinned nature of the kind of tragedy

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<sup>322</sup> "Man wollte frei werden in der Kunst, aber frei wovon? Man vergaß, daß Freiheit gleichzeitig Isoliertheit bedeutet. In ihrem ungestümen Drange befreite sich die Kunst von ihrer Unentbehrlichkeit." Meier-Graefe, "Beitrag zu einer modernen Aesthetik," *Die Insel* 1, no.1 (1899), 79. Meier-Graefe was writing more broadly against what he thought to be the excesses of individualism cut off from the real needs of society in a democratic culture.

<sup>323</sup> "On s'arrête long-temps, sans doute, mais regarde-t-on toujours le tableau? Non, chacun regarde sa propre pensée." Mérimée, "Salon de 1839," 89. Translated in Wright, *Painting and History during the French Restoration*, 119.

that seemed meaningful in the modern era. “With the advent of the Dreyfus affair, he was quite beside himself,” Valéry tells us. Describing his personal life, Valéry draws on the same metaphor that he used to describe his method of art making, as a series of operations.

He would bite his nails. He would listen for the slightest hint of what he suspected, would burst out, would make a clean break at once: ‘Adieu, monsieur...’ and turn his back on the enemy forever. Very old and intimate friends were *cut* in this fashion.<sup>324</sup>

Daniel Halévy recorded his own painful experience of such:

Thursday, 25 November 1897. Last night chatting among ourselves at the end of the evening—until then the subject had been proscribed as Papa was on edge, Degas was very anti-Semitic—we had a few moments of delightful gaiety and relaxation...It was the last of our happy conversations.<sup>325</sup>

And so Daniel Halévy concludes his account of the last evening he spent in Degas’s presence, describing the shift from sociability to withdrawal and ultimately silence:

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<sup>324</sup> “Il devint enragé au moment de l’Affaire Dreyfus. Il se rongait les ongles. Au moindre indice, il devinait, il éclatait, il rompait net: ‘Adieu, Monsieur...’ et il tournait à jamais le dos à l’adversaire. De très anciens et très intimes amis furent ainsi *coupés* par lui, sans délai, ni recours.” Valéry, *Degas*, 91. Translated in Jeffrey Meyers, *Impressionist Quartet: The Intimate Genius of Manet and Morisot, Degas and Cassatt* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005), 240.

<sup>325</sup> “Jeudi 25 novembre 1897. Hier soir, causant entre nous à la fin de la soirée—le sujet avait été jusque là proscrit, papa étant très énervé, Degas très antisémite—nous avons eu, en causant des moments de gaieté délicieuse et de détente. Dernière de nos conversations délicieuses.” Halévy, *Degas parle*, 127. Translated in Daniel Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, trans., Mina Curtiss (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 97.



Our friendship was to end suddenly and in silence...One last time Degas dined with us...Degas remained silent....His lips were closed; he looked upwards almost constantly as though cutting himself off from the company that surrounded him. Had he spoken it would no doubt have been in defense of the army, the army whose traditions and virtues he held so high, and which was now being insulted by our intellectual theorizing. Not a word came from those closed lips, and at the end of dinner Degas disappeared.<sup>326</sup>

Similarly, like this last encounter, the closed-lip nature of Degas's last great painting serves as a kind of paradoxical statement about the impossibility of making one. Yet, insofar as it suggests of the conditions of the polarized present, in its final, powerful and tragic iteration *The Fallen Jockey* realizes Degas's earliest and deepest of artistic ambitions, of finding a historical art of the present, a composition that encodes his era in the painted surface.

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<sup>326</sup> “Notre amitié va prendre fin d’un coup et en silence; elle périt, sauve des mots avilissants. Une dernière fois, nous eûmes Degas à notre table. Quels étaient les convives? Je n’en ai nul souvenir. Sans doute une jeunesse qui ne surveilla pas ses mots. Degas resta silencieux. Conscient de la menace qui pesait sur nous, je regardais attentivement son visage: les lèvres étaient closes, le regard presque constamment levé vers le haut, comme écarté de la compagnie qui l’entourait. C’est une défense de l’armée que nous eûmes sans doute entendue, de l’armée dont il mettait si haut les traditions et les vertus, insultée par nos propos d’intellectuels. Pas un mot ne sortit des lèvres closes, et Degas à la fin du dîner disparut.” Halévy, *Degas parle*, 127-8. Translated in Halévy, *My Friend Degas*, 100-1.

## Coda

My dissertation has traced the evolution of Degas's youthful ambition to be a history painter in the manner of the grand tradition. The multiple versions and revisions of his steeplechase paintings, from youth to maturity to old age, trace the manner by which he negotiated and renegotiated that ambition across a complex field of art historical influences, past and present. At its core, I believe that the transformation of *The Steeplechase* to *The Fallen Jockey* marks Degas's acceptance of the impossibility of his original, imagined destiny. Giving up in all but its size the communicative, public-oriented mandate of an older art, it embraces interiority as the new, viable, representational desideratum of advanced art making. Already, in its first incarnation, the absence of a steeplechase seemed to adumbrate this inward turn. "In all this obscurity...is it at least possible to discern some dim landmarks, some vague laws?" asks the protagonist of Huysman's *Cathedral*.<sup>327</sup> The site of the steeplechase of Chartres offered the orientation he sought. Insofar as Degas conspicuously marks the absence of such a landmark, Degas seems to acknowledge the loss of the kind of communal vision on which any art ambitious for a wide audience had in the past depended.<sup>328</sup> In acknowledging this loss of recognized *points de repère* as a condition of

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<sup>327</sup> "Dans cet inconnu, poursuivit Durtal, est-il au moins possible de découvrir de vagues repères, de timides règles?" Joris-Karl Huysmans, *La Cathédrale* (Paris: P.V. Stock, 1898), 23.

<sup>328</sup> In this sense, Degas anticipates a major theme of modernist painting in the twentieth century. On the subject of modernism's loss of faith in the existence of a unified consciousness see T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), in particular the two chapters, "Cubism and Collectivity" and "God is not Cast Down."

modernity Degas I think accepts his own modernity, and lodges it within the fate of *grande peinture* at the *fin-de-siècle*. “To be modern is to know *that which is not possible anymore*.”<sup>329</sup>

It seems appropriate at this moment to introduce a series of photographs that Degas produced at around the same time that he painted *The Fallen Jockey*. These throw sharply into relief the thematics that we retrieve from *The Fallen Jockey*, not least among them nostalgia for what belongs to the past. The palpable mortuary tone of these black-and-white photographs look back to the origins of the medium, to the earliest and most primitive paper negatives and daguerreotypes of figures who pose, deathly still and dimly lit, in an interior space. These photographs have little to do with the vogue for photographic instantaneity. Stillness, not speed, characterizes Degas’s interest in the possibilities of the medium.

As with *The Fallen Jockey*, these photographs also make plain the artist’s turn to an interiorized kind of art making. In these photographs, Degas literally turned the lens on his own domestic world, onto the quiet drama that took place within his home in the evening.<sup>330</sup> They are perhaps his most overtly biographical

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<sup>329</sup> “Être moderne, c’est savoir *ce qui n’est plus possible*.” Roland Barthes, “Réquichot et son corps” in *L’Obvie et l’obtus, Essais critiques* III (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 211.

<sup>330</sup> Susan Sidlauskas discusses how the shift towards an interiorized kind of art making was signaled by the literal turn inward by artists’ to representations of their domestic sphere, that of “the confined space of the gas-lit interior and comfortably-furnished bourgeois apartment.” “During the nineteenth century,” Sidlauskas explains, “the practice of animating one’s immediate surroundings began as material inspiration and came to constitute a mode of configuring identity.” Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8-9.

works. In his vivid memoir, Daniel Halévy describes the long evenings in which he and his family served as Degas's subjects, posing dutifully for these photographs, staged after dinner. He tells of the patience that the artist's perfectionism demanded. Halévy warned: "If one is invited for the evening you know what to expect: two hours of military obedience."<sup>331</sup> In one photograph, of 1895, Degas and Ludovic Halévy's wife, Louise, sit at a table with an oil lamp between them. Louise is reading to Degas. (Degas now relied on others to read to him; his maid Zoé Closier read *La Libre Parole* to him in the morning and Daniel Halévy read from *The Thousand and One Nights* to him in the evening.<sup>332</sup>) In another photograph, Louise lies on a sofa and Daniel sits on a chair beside her. Their eyes are closed either in sleep or reverie. In another, we see the aged and bearded Ludovic Halévy, seated in his armchair, waiting patiently (**fig. 36**). This would be the last of the many portraits Degas made of his old friend.

These photographs even touch on the opposition between the everyday realm of genre and the transcendent one of history—that oppositional structure that I think served the artist as an enabling and energizing force. On the one hand, in their attention to intimate and ordinary activities that take place in an interior setting replete with everyday things, these photographs point to the tradition of

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<sup>331</sup> "Tous deux rentrèrent; dès lors la soirée *plaisir* était finie; Degas enfla sa voix, devint autoritaire, commanda qu'on portât une lampe au petit salon et que quiconque ne poserait pas y allât—la soirée *devoir* commença; il fallut obéir à la terrible volonté de Degas, à sa férocité d'artiste. En ce moment, tous ses amis parlent de lui avec terreur. Si on l'invite le soir, on sait à quoi l'on s'engage: à deux heures d'obéissance militaire." Halévy, *Degas parle*, 91-2.

<sup>332</sup> On September 9, 1888, Degas had written to the sculptor Paul-Albert Bartholomé: "Les Mille et une Nuits me calment, m'instruisent et m'élèvent jusqu'à la sagesse." Degas, *Lettres de Degas*, 125.

genre. Yet, these photographs also stand apart from that tradition. The immobile, sharply-lit accoutrements of daily life—a fan, a vase, a lamp—carry the intensified power of an emblem, as if invested with a kind of infinity, to use Valéry’s turn of phrase. An oil lamp, for instance, stands for light itself: it glares with such intensity that its earthly contours dissolve into a flare of light. The blinding light that we see in the mirror of *Renoir and Mallarmé* dissolves the mechanical apparatus of the camera into a symbol of specularity itself.

As with *The Fallen Jockey*, these photographs reference a number of images, both Degas’s own and Manet’s. In the background of a few of these photographs we can make out the paintings that hung on Degas’s walls, those paintings that he chose to keep close. (“A person never appears against neutral or vague backgrounds,” Duranty wrote in *La Nouvelle Peinture*, indicating what we ought to see in Degas’s art. “When at rest, he will not be merely pausing or striking a meaningless pose before the photographer’s lens.”<sup>333</sup>) In one such photograph, Degas sits below two works by Manet, an early lithograph of Polichinelle and a late still life of a ham (**fig. 37**). Hanging on the wall above these works is Degas’s own portrait of Manet and his wife, Suzanne, that he painted soon after they met when Degas was thirty-five years old. Degas sits facing left and, in the painting, Manet sits facing right: as if still in conversation, then, they sit across from each other. Reminiscing about the personal

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<sup>333</sup> “Nous ne séparerons plus le personnage du fond d’appartement ni du fond de rue. Il ne nous apparaît jamais, dans l’existence, sur des fonds neutres, vides et vagues....Son repos ne sera pas une pause, ni une pose sans but, sans signification devant l’objectif du photographe...” Duranty, *La Nouvelle peinture*, 21-2.

circumstances behind the painting (the background behind it, figuratively speaking), Degas once told Vollard why Manet had cut it in two:

Yes, it's quite true, Manet thought his wife didn't fit into the picture; as a matter of fact he was probably right. And I made a fool of myself over that affair, for, furious as I was at the time, I took down a little still life that Manet had given me, and wrote to him: 'Monsieur, I am sending you back your *Plums*' ... Ah! What a lovely painting that was!<sup>334</sup>

By the time Degas's anger subsided and he asked for his *Plums* back Manet had already sold it. The sense of belatedness that hangs heavy in *The Fallen Jockey*—of a past tradition of imagery irretrievable in the present—is here framed in suggestively biographical terms.

Indeed, given the biographical charge of the art of this period, I find it hard not to read into Degas's last, major equestrian painting a personal metaphor, one drawn from a short story by his oldest friend, Ludovic Halévy, "The Circus Charger." As in his photograph of Mallarmé, Degas I suspect suggests his own presence through an aesthetics of indirection, in this instance, mediated through the narrative of another. The theme of Halévy's story is one that resonates most strongly in the conversations of Degas's late years: solitude. On the subject of human bonds and sociability, Degas spoke often of the pain of loneliness. "You

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<sup>334</sup> Vollard inquired: "Cependant, monsieur Degas, Manet lui-même n'a-t-il pas coupé le portrait que vous aviez fait de lui et de sa femme?" Degas answered: "Oui, c'est vrai... Après tout, c'est peut-être lui qui avait raison. Et j'ai été le dindon de cette affaire, car, furieux, sur le moment, je décrochai du mur une petite nature morte que Manet m'avait donnée: 'Monsieur, lui écrivis-je, je vous renvoie vos *Prunes*...' Ah! qu'elle était jolie, cette toile!" Vollard, *Souvenirs d'un marchand de tableaux* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1937), 73. Translated in Vollard, *Recollections of a Picture Dealer*, trans., Violet M. MacDonald (New York: Dover Publications, 2011), 56.

do not realize how terrible it is to be alone as you grow old,” he warned the young Vollard, with “nothing to think of but—death.”<sup>335</sup> He evaluated often his decision not to have married. “Living alone, without a family, is really hard. I never would have suspected it would cause me so much suffering.”<sup>336</sup> Reminiscing as an old man, the protagonist of Halévy’s story—a jockey, in fact—looks back to an accident in middle age when he was spared the fate of solitude. The story involves an unruly horse. “I,” the protagonist begins, “was married off by a circus charger.”

I was nearly forty years of age, and I felt so peacefully settled in my little bachelor habits that, in the best faith in the world, on all occasions, I swore by the gods never to run the great risk of marriage; but I reckoned without the circus charger....The horse was a good rider—too good a rider, in fact....How did it end? To my shame, to my great shame, I was pitifully unhorsed by an incomparable feat!....I was greatly discouraged; and feeling incapable of another effort, I remained in that position...closing my eyes, and awaiting death....I was there, miserable, in the grass, covered with sand, with my hair in disorder, my clothes in rags, and my unfortunate leg stiff.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> “Degas m’avait dit à plusieurs reprises: ‘Vollard, il faut se marier. Vous ne savez pas ce que c’est que la solitude quand on vieillit...Toujours penser à la mort!’” Vollard, *En Écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1938), 118. Translated in Vollard, *Degas, An Intimate Portrait*, 64.

<sup>336</sup> “Vivre seul, sans famille, c’est vraiment trop dur. Je ne me serais jamais douté que je dusse en souffrir autant.” Mary Pittaluga and Enrico Piconi, *Da Nittis* (Milan: Bramante, 1963), 369.

<sup>337</sup> “Moi, dit Paul, j’ai été marié par le cheval du trompette. J’étais bien près de mes quarante ans et je me sentais si paisiblement ancré dans mes petites manies de vieux garçon, que, de la meilleure foi du monde, en toute occasion, je jurais mes grands dieux que jamais je ne me risquerais à courir la grande aventure du mariage, mais je comptais sans le cheval du trompette....c’était un cheval bien mis, c’était même un cheval trop bien mis....Comment tout cela finit-il? A ma honte, à ma très-grande honte!...Je fus piteusement désarçonné par un panache incomparable....Je fus pris alors d’un grand découragement, et, me sentant incapable d’un nouvel

The parallels between Degas's personhood and painting and Halévy's narrative and imagery are striking enough—with a significant exception: Halévy's story ends happily. A woman comes to the fallen rider's rescue and becomes his wife. If Degas's *Fallen Jockey* suggests a different, darker ending, so to speak, I understand this both as a rejection of the insistent happiness of Halévy's fiction and, even, of Halévy himself with whom, by 1897, as Daniel Halévy tells us, he no longer spoke. I see in the jockey's dark, thick and scruffy eyebrows, mustache and beard and sharply-pointed nose—how could I not?—Halévy's features, those that Degas so often recorded throughout the years and that he captured in his last photographic portrait of 1895 (**figs. 38, 39**). Here, these features are brutally exaggerated to the point of caricature. Degas's *Portraits at the Stock Exchange* (1879), with its stereotyped image of the Jew, comes uncomfortably to mind.

In another sense, too, if Degas's *Fallen Jockey* suggests a different, darker version of events than that of his former friend's, I understand this to allegorize something of artist's own reflection on and ultimate acceptance of the necessities of his own vocation. While Degas longed for intimacy, he nevertheless recognized that his art demanded complete devotion. "There is love and there is

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effort, je restai dans cette posture...fermant les yeux et attendant la mort.....J'étais là, misérablement, dans le gazon, couvert de sable, avec mes cheveux en désordre, mes vêtements en lambeaux et ma malheureuse jambe toute roide." Halévy, "Le Cheval du trompette" in *Madame et Monsieur Cardinal* [1873] (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1884), 74-7, 81-2, 88. Translated in Halévy, *Parisian Points of View*, trans., Edith Matthews (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), 50, 52, 55-6, 60.



work. And we have only one heart.”<sup>338</sup> At another time, drawing directly on an equestrian metaphor in a letter to Ludovic Halévy, he explained: “For the traveler the beat of the horse’s hoofs is sweeter than a woman’s footsteps.”<sup>339</sup> What Degas’s art however does suggest—and perhaps nowhere more powerfully than in *The Fallen Jockey*—is the consolation or companionship that the artist finds in riding alongside those fellow travelers traversing the same rich and difficult, obstacle-laden course of tradition.

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<sup>338</sup> “Il y a l’amour, il y a l’oeuvre, et on a qu’un seul coeur.” Pittaluga and Piceni, *Da Nittis*, 369.

<sup>339</sup> Letter written on October 14, 1890 during a trip by horse and carriage through the Burgundy countryside. “De Darcey par les Laumes, Marmagne, on suit la voie....En route pour Nuits. Pour le voyageur, le trot du cheval est plus doux que le pas d’une femme.” *Lettres de Degas*, 169. Translated in *Degas Letters*, 163.

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### **Curriculum Vita**

Hyla Robicsek was born November 19, 1980, in Toronto, Canada. She graduated with high distinction from the University of Toronto with an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in art history and English literature in 2002. In 2003, she received a Master of Arts degree from The Courtauld Institute of Art in London, England where she was awarded a distinction. Following this, she taught modern and contemporary art at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. She then attended The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, where she pursued a Ph.D. in the History of Art, which she completed in 2014.